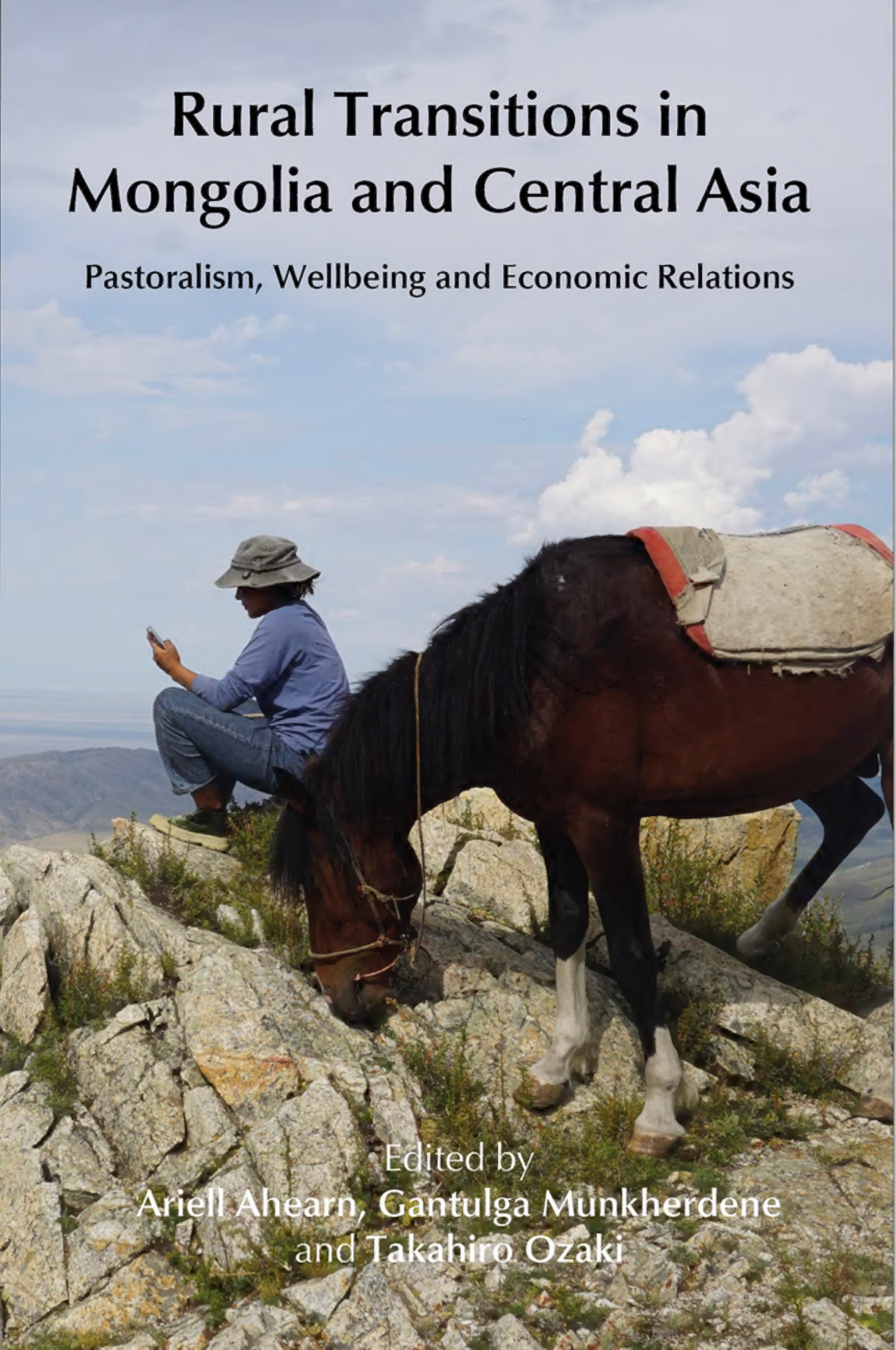
Rural Transitions in Mongolia and Central Asia

Pastoralism, Wellbeing and Economic Relations



Edited by
Ariell Ahearn, Gantulga Munkherdene
and Takahiro Ozaki

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1. The book features two variations on spellings – Qazaqstan and Kazakhstan. The Kazakh language will be transitioning from Cyrillic to Latin-based script. When the script changes to Latin, the official spelling will be Qazaqstan.

Author Biographies

Chieko Hirota is a JSPS Research Fellow at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Centre, Hokkaido University, specialising in cultural anthropology and area studies (Mongolia, Central Asia). With a doctorate in Human Geography from Chiba University, she is fascinated by Kazakh embroidered wall hangings and, since 2011, has been conducting field research on Kazakh handicrafts in western Mongolia. Living in Bayan-Ölgii Province for two years, she reported on seasonal migration, domestication and food culture. Now her research has expanded to include Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and work on comparative research into the nomadic cultures of Central Eurasia.

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Daniel J. Murphy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Cincinnati in the USA. He has published ethnographic research on Mongolian pastoralism and applied research on climate change planning in the rural American west. He is currently collaborating on a global comparative project exploring the role of social networks in generating wealth inequality in rural communities.

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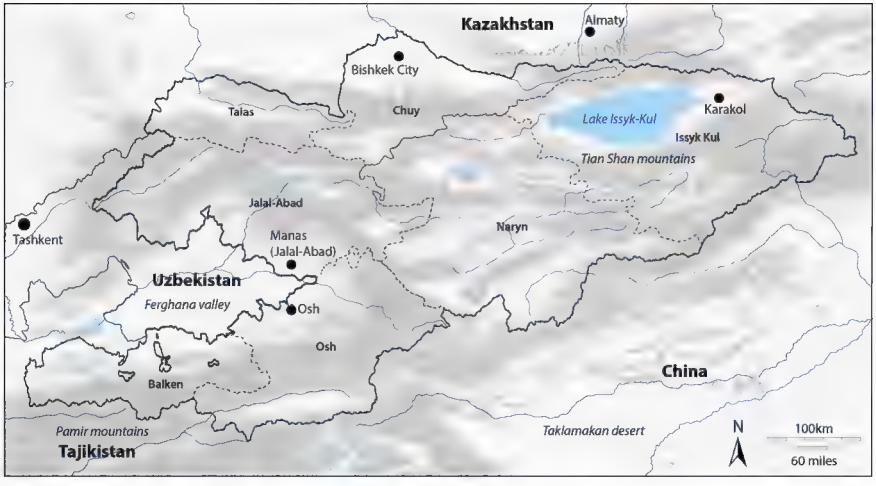
Map of Mongolia showing provinces and principal towns.



Map of Kyrgyzstan showing provinces. The outlined areas in Balkan province are claimed by Uzbekistan.

❄ *Introduction* ❄

Post-Covid Transitions in Inner Asia

Ariell Ahearn and Gantulga Munkherdene

As we write from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in July 2025, people are bustling around the city preparing for the national Naadam holiday, and the roads are thick with traffic. The Covid-19 pandemic is barely visible in the public's metaphorical rear-view mirror as everyday life has returned to normal. Rather than daily updates on Covid cases, recent political scandals have overwhelmed the national media. Today, few would be thinking about the protests in Ulaanbaatar's Sukhbaatar Square in 2021 over the cancellation of the summer Naadam public events and counter-protesters appealing for social distancing to stop the transmission of the virus during the second and third waves of infections. While the Covid-19 pandemic is a period that many would prefer to forget, it was nonetheless one that had profound impacts on everyday lives, including the loss of life and livelihoods, exposing economic fragilities on a range of scales and provoking new political subjectivities. With much of the research for the chapters in this book taking place directly after pandemic travel restrictions were lifted, starting in 2021, the authors present an analysis of detailed case studies on a broad range of issues in the post-pandemic period, including contemporary pastoralism and household responses to environmental hazards and change, notions of wellbeing and engagement with traditional foods and medicine, and rural–urban dynamics.

During the pandemic, the closure of national borders and extended lockdowns caused economic and social distress at a global scale, but with important regional specificities. For the region of Inner and Central Asia, China's Covid-19 control policies put new, strict controls on mobility and trade across borders and gave new meaning to the word 'landlocked', as geographical isolation was felt anew. Both Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan share long national borders and deep economic dependence on China, which had reverberations for the nations' essential industries, including the agricultural sector. In Mongolia, the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with a *dzud* (winter disaster) in several regions, which involved significant hardship for pastoralists as they struggled to keep livestock alive in difficult conditions and during lockdowns (see Ahearn et al., 2025). While the Mongolian economy has largely recovered since the end of

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pandemic restrictions, its national development strategy remains tightly connected to the expansion of mineral extraction, leaving the national budget exposed to changes in international demand for minerals and commodity prices. Likewise, mines are established on traditional pastureland through central government licensing processes, leading to the forced displacement of herders from their homeland territories. The combination of climate change impacts and the expansion of mineral extraction has created new risks for herders to navigate in the post-pandemic period.

In Kyrgyzstan, Bruley and Mamadiiarov (2022) assert that the pandemic was a trigger for the political revolution that occurred in October 2020, due to widespread public frustration over corruption and lack of government transparency. The Kyrgyz socioeconomic situation was also impacted by restrictions on labour migration to Russia, which represented close to thirty per cent of GDP in 2019 (Bossavie and Garrote-Sánchez, 2022: xi), and upon which many rural households depend for remittances. The presence of multiple crises created complex governance environments and strained economic conditions, but also revealed instances of citizen creativity, mutual help and resilience. For example, our prior research (Ahearn et al., 2025) demonstrated how rural pastoralist households in Mongolia donated significant amounts of meat to urban dwellers facing extended lockdowns and loss of employment. Likewise, monetary donations provided by citizens to the county governments of their birthplace often buoyed local budgets devastated by the economic conditions created by the pandemic (Byamba et al., 2023).

While the Covid-19 pandemic is not the explicit focus of this book, the pandemic provides the chapters with a common temporal reference point. In this sense, the collection traces rural transformations by focusing on the five-year period 2020–2025, though several chapters also draw on decades of research with families in specific locations. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic generated critical reflections on ways of working and doing research, the role of the state, food systems and global economic dependencies. In the region of Inner Asia, we witnessed socio-cultural changes in mobility, urban–rural relations, healing practices, the traditional arts, mining and mobile pastoralism. The chapters represent a collaborative effort to study these changes from the viewpoint of human geography, anthropology, history, international relations and other social science fields. While the pandemic has ended in many ways, its impacts on society and politics continue to reverberate, with new side effects emerging in indirect spaces. Critical analysis of these nuanced impacts across multiple spheres of society enables new understandings of cultural and political expression, forms of social organisation, and practices in the everyday life of Inner Asian pastoralist societies and nations.

Rural change in pastoralist societies

The book's focus on case studies of rural transitions, spotlighting the themes of pastoralism, wellbeing and economic relations, necessitates reflection on recent research in critical agrarian and pastoralist studies. Scoones and Nori (2023) assert that pastoralists are experts in living with uncertainty and are the best guides in helping development practitioners and policymakers move beyond a mode of control and towards an approach that works with uncertainty in fruitful ways. Yet, they also note that pastoralists around the world are confronted with new types of uncertainties, including the global Covid-19 pandemic, the impacts of climate change on their environments, loss of land due to privatisation, land grabbing or state policies that favour industrial and corporate development on rural lands. We have observed such conditions in Mongolia, where over 2,000 mineral licences have been issued across pastoralists' lands, often without any form of resettlement or compensation processes (Sternberg and Ahearn, 2023). In addition to favouring the expansion of the mineral extraction industry on pastoralist territories, the Mongolian Government's policies lack explicit protections for pastoralist mobility and increasingly promote intensification of agriculture, including crop agriculture and industrial feedlot-style farming. These developments track with the global trends noted by Scoones and Nori (2023: 6): 'As a frontier for development, major investments are occurring across the world's rangelands, whether for irrigated agriculture, conservation areas, hunting and tourism, watershed management, mining, or alternative energy investments.' Scoones (2021) also noted that pastoralists are increasingly 'subsumed by global capitalism' (p. 24), reflected in changing labour relations and the financialisation of pastoralist production, for example through bank loans or insurance processes (Murphy and Ichinkhorloo, 2024). Galvin (2009), in her article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* titled 'Transitions: Pastoralists Living with Change', also identified fragmentation of rangelands and environmental resources and climate change as primary causes of change in pastoral societies, indicating that these issues have been observed for nearly two decades.

Ironically, the impacts of climate change on pastoral environments and herder livelihoods are often used to justify policies that support the end of pastoralism. In August 2024, Ahearn met with representatives of the Embassy of Australia to present human rights violations faced by Mongolian herders due to the lack of national requirements for social safeguards such as social impact assessment during mining licensing processes. In response, a high-level official in the Embassy did not show any signs of concern over the human rights violations and explained to her that they are supporting herders' transition to new industries, such as mining, because they believe traditional pastoralism is no longer viable due to environmental risks. Khan (2025) notes a similar trend in

Chitral, Pakistan, where 'the climate-change discourse of the government and NGOs discourages people from pursuing a pastoralist way of life; blames pastoralists for causing flooding by overgrazing; and promotes the Western neoliberal idea of enclosure and conservation of the commons … though government projects such as the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami'. (p.119) While environmental governance discourses such as those on grassland degradation have long been used to advance fencing of grasslands and pastoralist sedentarisation (Williams, 2002; Yeh, 2005), our current era of climate change governance and related development policies (see also Scoones, 2022) may create new challenges for the practice of mobile pastoralism and further discourage the next generation from taking up this way of life. With mobile pastoralism often presented as a livestock production system rather than an Indigenous way of life, questions of climate justice, self-determination and Indigenous social, cultural and economic rights are sorely lacking in policy discussions.

These trends also sit within a broader context in which mobile pastoralism continues to face deep-rooted biases, both explicit and implicit, in international and state policies and practice. For example, in 2024, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples initiated the first report at the UN level explicitly focusing on the situation of mobile Indigenous Peoples, including pastoralists, herders and hunter-gatherers (UN General Assembly, 2024). The report outlines issues facing pastoralists' mobility and rights to land, access to social, economic and political rights, and representation. It draws on input provided directly from herders, NGOs and other stakeholders through their written contributions and oral interventions during virtual consultations. The report concludes that discrimination against pastoralists is not a historical phenomenon, but is visible across contemporary global institutions and state service provision (including in educational and health care). Scholars have coined the term 'sedentist bias' to identify how pastoral mobility is disincentivised through the requirements to have fixed addresses to access health care and schooling, or the favouring of settled agriculture over mobile pastoralism (see Rodgers and Semplici, 2023; Hassan et al., 2023). The UN report (2024: 24) reflects similar findings, stating that 'Mobile Indigenous Peoples experience multiple and systematic forms of discrimination and human rights violations based on negative stereotypes about their mobile lifestyles, therefore their rights are often not protected under States' legal and policy frameworks.' The report also connects these forms of discrimination to the barriers pastoralists face to having their political, economic and social rights recognised and protected by states, as well as full recognition and protection of customary mobile land tenure.

The multiple challenges facing contemporary pastoralism globally on many fronts, including climate change impacts on local environments and the

dire examples seen globally of discrimination, forced displacement, land grabbing and unfavourable government policies, interact dynamically with pastoralists' own aspirations, decision-making and adaptations. Khan's (2025) research in Chitral, Pakistan, for example, notes that young people from pastoralist societies are increasingly moving to urban areas to do wage labour or pursue non-pastoralist livelihoods. This appears to signal an exit from rural pastoralist livelihoods, while in other cases scholars such as Boas (2022) have noted the phenomenon of 'virtual herding' (p. 3340) where individuals combine urban-based work with management of hired herders and their herds through their digital devices. It is clear that digital devices are increasingly integrated into pastoralist practices to enable mobility, networking and information exchange (Parlasca, 2021). Is this a form of pastoralist diversification? Or a shift away from household-based pastoralism and towards a more commercial livestock-raising business model? This difference was highlighted by Schareika et al. (2021, p. 53), who note that pastoralists themselves are making the shift from traditional livelihoods oriented around family relations to individualistic, capitalist-oriented ranching. They write that, in West and Central Africa, 'now it is Fulani pastoralists themselves who are making the shift from pastoralism to ranching without support from the government or development organisations'. However, they note that, while pastoralism and ranching contain hybrid elements in these settings, ranching based on more capitalist logics is propelled by both land privatisation and ownership (the ability to own and control portions of grasslands) and the shift to wage labour for herding. In reflecting on these broader shifts in household organisation, including the exit of youth from herding to pursue urban or semi-urban livelihoods, which in turn may affect the availability of household-based labour for herding and the intergenerational transfer of pastoralist skills, knowledge and values, we continually struggle with the question: do the similar dynamics we observe also signal a tipping point for pastoralism in the region of Inner Asia? How do we make sense of these changes without presenting fatalistic narratives on the future of pastoralism, narratives that have often been used politically to the detriment of pastoralists?

During our collaborative fieldwork in July 2025 in Bayankhongor province, Munkherdene and I met middle-aged herders in the province's Bayanbulag and Gurvanbulag counties, who noted that there were very few young herders in their twenties in the county. Several households that we interviewed noted that their children are not interested in becoming herders themselves, raising questions over the next generation of pastoralism in the area. Will the county be inhabited by fewer and fewer full-time herder households, leading to new forms of absentee herding based on hired labour? Or will there increasingly be large areas of land available for some herders to occupy with ever larger herds, perhaps

shifting to ranching for meat production rather than today's household-based diverse production of traditional dairy products, meat and fibre based on multi-species herds? During our speculation on these issues, Munkherdene warned me that focusing on the idea of pastoralist households as a nuclear family unit based in the countryside was perhaps unhelpful, given that this idea of stable nuclear family organisation is not necessarily a constant in Mongolian pastoralist society. As he presents in his chapter on new forms of long-distance mobility, diversification of livelihoods may not necessarily signal an end of pastoralism but rather forms of adaptation that make use of new digital and transportation technologies, but where networks and relationships continue to be crucial to pastoralist mobility. This finding echoes wider theoretical work on pastoralism, which emphasises how pastoralist responses to variable environments are flexible, network-based and often use experimental methods (see also Scoones and Nori, 2023). During instances of compounding disasters such as the co-occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic and *dzud* (winter disaster) or, in other regions, drought, locust and livestock epidemics, DeMartino, Grabel and Scoones (2024, p. 7) note that herders in the Greater Horn of Africa responded through a range of responses such as redistributing livestock across different sites, negotiating access to new pastures, selling livestock or changing the species composition of livestock, and finding new forms of income through labour diversification. They also note the importance of extensive social networks (and social capital more widely) for mobility, to accessing new information and additional resources (financial and otherwise).

Given the ongoing forms of discrimination and the complex, uncertain environments that pastoralists live in, it is easy to foreground fatalistic accounts of the future of pastoralism. However, in doing collaborative fieldwork in Bayankhongor province, we identified the importance of carefully attending to how change is conceptualised by herders, as well as identifying how representations of change by academic discourse and theory affect policy and understandings of pastoralist societies on the ground. As Krätli (2016) has noted in his work on methodological tools in pastoral development, the assumptions underpinning methods used by development practitioners (and academics), including the classifications we use and the scales of observation, tend to smuggle in notions of stability and predictability that theories such as non-equilibrium understandings of the environment and environmental change have largely tried to displace. Linear understanding of change would make it easy to present an 'end of nomadism' narrative to explain the transformations we see taking place; this narrative also tends to close down political possibilities. Given the challenges facing pastoralists today, imagining and articulating alternative political possibilities, together with herders themselves, that celebrate pastoralism and

counter systematic and structural biases and forms of discrimination should be the order of the day. In this sense, understanding change in pastoralist societies should also lead us to carefully consider the problem of using linear concepts of change in our understandings and analysis of pastoralist societies, as these narratives have consequences for real-world policy and perceptions.

Origins of the book

The book originated from the Post-Pandemic Societies in Inner Asia (PPIA) research project, which was co-funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Japan's Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). The project aimed to advance collaborations between scholars from across Japan, Mongolia, the UK, Europe and Kyrgyzstan and to support the career development of early-career scholars working in Inner and Central Asian Studies. Each project member focused on their research topic of interest for their chapter, and the majority of chapters are based on qualitative research informed by many years of prior research in the area. In many cases, researchers returned to their long-term field sites to conduct research for the first time in nearly two years, after pandemic restrictions were lifted during the project's inaugural year. The three-year post-pandemic timeframe in which research and writing took place focuses the book's empirical content on a common research period.

Many of the authors had phone and virtual contact with host families and herders in their long-term field sites during the early stages of the pandemic, leading us to reflect on the significant transformation in communication technology which has taken place in rural Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan over the last five years. The accessibility of communication technology has enabled many of us to keep in touch with our herder interlocutors through video and phone calls, or to observe updates posted on Facebook pages and group chats. Both Munkherdene and Ahearn were members of the official government Facebook groups for their fieldsites, such as the group for herders belonging to a *soum*'s subdistrict, which gave everyday insights into daily herder communications and official communications. Likewise, as researchers we were able to develop new collaborations using online tools, which continues to be the new norm in the post-pandemic period.

If we take the World Health Organisation's designation of 5 May 2023 as the date on which Covid-19 restrictions officially ended, then our fieldwork began during the final Covid period in both Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan. Although this coincided with a time when official restrictions had relatively eased, local people's caution had not necessarily diminished. In some respects, Covid affected our meetings with people in 2021, and we observed caution in peoples' words

and actions aimed at preventing the risk of transmission. On the other hand, quite a few herders were happy that, after the lockdowns, they had the chance to meet and speak freely after two years of restrictions. By 2022, Covid-19 had largely faded from public discussion, though signs and stickers on walls and floors continued to remind people to wear masks and keep a distance.

As part of the three-year project (2022–2025), several summer and spring schools were organised by the project members in Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan and Japan, focusing on academic publication processes and best practices. Several book chapters were developed in the context of these workshops as well as regular online meetings, conferences, and writing workshops held in Mongolia, Japan and the UK. In this sense, this book not only reflects a collection of recent empirical research, but also represents a community of scholars working in an international, collaborative ecosystem of knowledge exchange, encouragement and shared passion for Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan.

Changes in herding practices in Mongolia

A key theme of the book involves research on changes in mobile pastoralist herding practices in Mongolia. Cases are drawn from a range of areas, including the far west of Mongolia, the central provinces and the far east, though case studies from the Gobi region or regions heavily impacted by mining development are missing. The chapters focusing on pastoralism in Mongolia reflect a diverse range of practices, demonstrating that observations in one region should not be generalised to the entire country. As noted above, recent research on changes in pastoralist societies has highlighted the impacts of financialisation and commodification across pastoralist practices, changes in labour organisation, and the ongoing importance of livestock as a key form of capital. These themes also resonate with the research featured in the chapters by Munkherdene, Ozaki, Finke, Murphy et al., Sternberg et al. and Tomita, who note a range of ways in which the organisation and availability of household labour affect herding practices, including mobility, dairy production and forms of economic diversification. The chapters also distinguish different forms and practices of mobility undertaken by households, with Munkherdene suggesting that we might move beyond thinking of pastoral mobility only in terms of livestock movement and broaden it to include other household activities. Finke highlights the impact of Qazaq migration from Mongolia to Qazaqstan on the local economies of rural Khovd county in Khovd province. Likewise, Ozaki demonstrates how herders with fewer livestock tend to move less and focus on dairy product production and sale closer to provincial centres. Similar to Munkherdene's work reflecting new forms of long-distance mobility using large trucks and trailers, these mo-

bility practices reflect economic means (that is, the resources available to move) but also social relations and networks that span provincial and national borders.

In Chapter 2, Ozaki traces historical moments in pastoralism in rural Mongolia to demonstrate how social disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the collapse of socialism contributed to changes in herding strategies and land use. Focusing on two case studies in Bulgan and Sukhbaatar provinces to demonstrate differing pastoralist techniques, he also notes that 'in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, pastoral societies should and can establish a new equilibrium point for the future sustainability of the pastoralism they aspire to pursue'. In this view, he argues that Inner Asian pastoralist society has adapted as a result of many disasters occurring in the twenty-first century, such as *dzud*, free-market economic 'shock therapy,' and poverty. He argues that pastoralists' resilience works efficiently, and they successfully passed the disastrous time of Covid-19 in creating new strategies dependent on their household resources, reflecting a shift to suburban areas becoming more focused on milk production, while remote pastures shifted towards meat production.

On the opposite side of the country from Ozaki's fieldwork, Finke provides an overview of pastoralism in Western Mongolia over the last thirty years where the themes of mobility, livestock management and household labour availability are also featured. In this region, one of the significant changes over the last thirty years has been the migration of more than half of the local Qazaq population to Qazaqstan. He traces the strategies herders adopted at the end of socialism, including the tendency to maximise herds as a way to ward off risks from the new market economic system. The chapter highlights the importance of household labour availability for successful pastoralism, as well as the potential to diversify livelihoods through agriculture, trade, and other forms of wage labour. He notes that herders' pursuit of multiple livelihood strategies was temporarily suspended by socialist planners who saw 'specialisation as the gateway to enhancing productivity', but became an important form of adaptation in the post-socialist period.

In their collaborative chapter, Sternberg, Bayartogtokh and Tugsbuyan focus on women herders' perspectives on pastoralism. They argue, 'women's life decisions determine the continuity of family herding. Their choice to participate or leave herding has implications for its future viability.' This study shows that herder women emphasised several important points: that herding cannot be carried out without women; that adopting technologies such as mobile phones, solar panels, refrigerators, cars and motorcycles has eased their daily work; and that they are most often the ones who oversee and manage their households' finances and projects. Alongside these 'positive' effects, the study also highlights some concerns. As more girls from herder families move to towns and cities to

pursue education and settle there, questions arise about who will become herders in the future and who will perform the work done by women herders. Beyond the factors traditionally cited as negatively impacting herders' livelihoods, such as climate change, *dzud* and market-economy pressures, the chapter raises the question of how pastoralism might endure if there were no women herders.

Post-pandemic research on Mongolian pastoralism demonstrates that the pandemic itself did not heavily impact herders, and their herding strategies continue to reflect resilience and adaptability to new challenges. The authors also highlight that there is diversity in herder demographics and skills which affect their herding strategies, including the ability to move long distances. Both Ozaki and Finke identify significant differences in wealth, skills and resources amongst rural families, which may point to new forms of inequality. Likewise, Sternberg, Bayartogtokh and Tugsbuyan note the important roles of women in pastoralism and demonstrate that many women prefer their daughters to pursue non-pastoralist livelihoods, despite their own positive assessment of living in the countryside. Their chapter raises questions about the intergenerational transfer of knowledge to enable traditional pastoralist customs to continue without interruption. The theme of changing gender dynamics in pastoralism deserves further attention and study, as current research on transformation in pastoralist livelihoods has not fully addressed this issue or examined how it affects pastoralist practices. There is little doubt that Inner Asian herders have, over centuries, confronted numerous challenges – both those mentioned and those not mentioned in this study – and have continually found ways to address them.

Digital transformation in rural areas

Another area of transformation, partially triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, is the new affordability and accessibility of mobile technologies and 4G coverage in rural regions. Research in critical agrarian studies has drawn attention to digital transformations amongst farmers, noting 'the farm is going digital' (Nelson et al., 2024: 1303), including the introduction of technologies such as automated milking systems or remote sensing technologies for monitoring crops. Research from this field raises critical questions on who benefits, what knowledge is featured and produced, and how labour (both human and non-human) is transformed in the process. Likewise, the digital has entered rural governance processes in new ways. Mongolia, for example, has implemented the 'e-Mongolia' governance policy, accessible to all citizens by a mobile phone app, which consolidates government services onto a single platform. According to a Government news site, there are over 1,000 services available across 87 organisations through e-Mongolia (E-Mongolia Academy, 2024). Alongside

online banking, herders can access some government services online from their homes in the countryside. Likewise, rural governance offices in Mongolia have shifted to consolidating livestock statistics in digital databases and promoting new systems for tracking livestock sales. The Head of the Department of Agriculture in Ölziit *soum* (district), Bayankhongor, explained in an interview in July 2023,

> All animals are included in the [e-Mongolia] programme. By entering the programme, the person's registration and the person's livestock can be viewed from anywhere in Mongolia. For example, if they are going to sell their animals in the market, then they will send the registration of the animal to the other side [buyer], we will not give them any papers, we will just write the certificate of origin. Then a 6-digit code will be issued. After transporting [the livestock] there, there are posts on the roads to Övörkhangai [province] and Ulaanbaatar. As soon as I tell them the 6-digit code, they [post inspectors] will enter it into the computer. They have a chance to see that some cattle from a *soum* of Bayankhongor province are here. Everything related to animal husbandry is entered online.

In addition to official programmes such as e-Mongolia, many local governments created Facebook groups to disseminate information to local citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic which have continued to function in the post-pandemic period (see for example Ahearn et al., 2025). Rural mobile pastoralists and residents are adopting and experimenting with these wireless technologies in new ways. Due to government restrictions on face-to-face meetings in Mongolia during the pandemic, individuals adapted these technologies to support pastoral mobility, to create new forms of public engagement and to express political and economic discontent. Covid-19 has reshaped digital infrastructures, herding practices and mobility, and influenced practices of online protest and communication as well as cultural forms and expressions in Inner Asia. It has also created new pathways for networking, markets and urban–rural exchange on topics ranging from culture to politics.

In contrast to how critical agrarian studies have noted the ways in which digital technologies have facilitated the automation of farming, Munkherdene's chapter develops the concept of digital pastoralism and presents cases from Bayankhongor and Dundgovi provinces of pastoralist long-distance movement using semi-trucks and trailers across hundreds of kilometres. Rather than removing humans from processes of pastoralism, digital connectivity has enabled herding households to expand their networks to facilitate long-distance mobility. He argues that herders moved greater distances than was customary, and this movement was enabled by mobile technology and infrastructures. He observes that new forms of pastoralist mobility involved both expanded social networks, through mobile smartphones and access to social media (Facebook), and access

to transportation technologies such as trucks and trailers. In this way, his chapter highlights that we should consider pastoral mobility beyond just the movement of livestock; he presents 'mobility as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by practicalities and cultural interpretations', which, combined with the digital environment, has become an alternative strategy for mitigating *dzud* risks, creating and maintaining new social networks, and opening up new possibilities for selling and advertising livestock products.

Moving beyond pastoralism, Kamimura also highlights how some Mongolian traditional customs shifted to the digital realm after the Government of Mongolia began restrictions on public gatherings and travel in late January 2020. For example, the important Lunar New Year (Tsagaan Sar) greeting, typically performed in person and signifying respect for elders, shifted to an online form. He describes how other examples of traditional performing arts also shifted into digital formats during the Covid-19 lockdowns, as government ministries encouraged artists to produce content to boost public morale. This was especially evident during the Naadam virtual opening ceremony in 2020, which triggered a phenomenon called 'Dance Chance', a dance contest that took place on social media. The participants performed 'traditional' Mongolian folksongs and dances in fashionable forms, such as 'dance challenges' and 'flash mobs'. These video clips went viral and were impactful because of the simple but high-quality digital content, bringing into focus a new perspective on ethnic performing arts for Mongolian people. The chapter shows how hybridity of culture can affect cultural vitality, using the case of the 'Dance Chance' activities and events. Facebook and YouTube became platforms for exploring and performing traditional cultural expression in new ways and engaged new environments for dance and song, such as filming performances in the open steppe using smart phones and uploading the videos onto online platforms rather than organising performances on elaborate stages. The online content enabled the Mongolian traditional arts to be shared widely and produced a 'call and response' type of environment, where one group's performance inspired others to create and post their own original version or try to imitate and experiment with versions available online.

Across the chapters focusing on Mongolia, Facebook features centrally as the site for digital engagement, whether it be for pastoralism, cultural performances or as a platform for political expression and protest. This was also true for Mongolia's growing mineral extraction sector. Over the past twenty years, the county has issued over 2,000 mineral licences across the country (Mineral Licenses and Petroleum Authority, 2025) for minerals including coal, gold, copper, fluorspar, silver, uranium and other valuable minerals. Mines and related infrastructure have led to damage to pasture, water, and sacred sites, and herders

are excluded from decision-making processes due to Mongolia's poor record on environmental and social governance (see also Sternberg and Ahearn, 2023; UN General Assembly, 2024). It is in this context of rapid mineral extraction development that Pakulla examines labour relations in the South Gobi's Oyu Tolgoi mine, the largest mine in the country, holding vast reserves of copper and gold including a vast underground mining operation. Pakulla examines the ways that OT miners engage with their identity as workers in one of the largest workforces in the country, and the inequalities created between workers contracted directly with OT and those working for subcontractors or as seasonal workers. She describes how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, miners' online organising and protest against injustices including low wages, long shifts and the inequality between foreign workers and Mongolian workers led to a change in the national Labour Law. Working conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the injustices already felt by workers who spend weeks away from their families in long work shifts based at the mine. The new Labour Law, while celebrated as a form of progress by regulating the length of work shifts of people directly employed by OT, had the contradictory effect of leaving subcontractors in an ongoing state of precarity.

When adopting a wider scale view of rural transformations in Mongolia encompassing the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, the chapters in this book demonstrate that digital change has affected the region's main rural economic bases – both pastoralism and mining – as well as cultural expression and performance. The digital transformation serves as a bridge linking city and countryside and connecting local areas to the wider world, while also constituting a significant shift in everyday life. At the time of research and writing, in Mongolia, Facebook remains the most popular venue for public engagement and networking, including official Government pages and groups created for communication to citizens. While herders have adopted digital technology to facilitate mobility based on more traditional forms of mobile land use, we have not seen a shift towards automation in livestock production in the country yet, though it will be important to take a critical approach towards understanding the future integration and impact of digital technologies with pastoralism. Scholars such as Mauerman et al. (2023, p. 171) have noted how livestock identification and traceability systems (used to control livestock disease) in Namibia are 'suffused with sedentist assumptions that are at odds with the livestock management practices of pastoralist communities'. As we have discussed earlier, the ongoing discrimination against pastoralist livelihoods, as well as the pervasive 'sedentist bias' arising from a lack of understanding of nomadic relationalities and mobile land use systems by international experts and policymakers, may take hold in future digital systems aimed at the pastoralist economy.

Finally, recognising that rural Mongolia is not only a pastoral but increasingly a mining region, these chapters point to the tensions arising from rapid shifts in land use, governance and labour regimes since the end of socialism. While many have noted the uncertainties associated with pastoralism since the end of socialist state support, Pakulla's chapter also highlights how socialist-era jobs in the mining sector shifted from being a job-for-life that could be passed down to children, to a new labour regime where workers have precarious and often dangerous employment, and face pressures from chronic debt and lack of state protection. Digital activism has helped bring these issues to light and added pressure on the government to address shortcomings in labour protection, but guarantees for short-term labourers and subcontractors remain lacking as the mineral enterprise is partitioned out amongst many different companies. The weak governance of labour standards in Mongolia's mining sector also extends to its poor record of environmental and social governance standards and land acquisition processes, which have resulted in the ongoing dispossession of pastoralists and forced displacement from their territories across the country.

Covid-19 crisis, local food and traditional treatments

The book includes a significant theme exploring traditional food culture and ideas of wellbeing. This theme emerged in relation to people's experience of confronting a new virus during the Covid-19 pandemic, which triggered an exploration of alternative medicines as well as a return to traditional forms of treatment and concepts of wellbeing. Several authors explore how Mongolians sought self-reliance during the crisis: certain foods were 'nationalised' as remedies, such as *airag* (fermented mare's milk) and hearty meat broths made from locally pasture-raised livestock meat, which were promoted as good protection against Covid. Some traditional medicinal plants and techniques were used as potential treatments; for example, Mongolian herders promoted the burning of dried horse dung to cleanse the air from bad spirits and disease. This intriguing logic of overcoming a 'foreign' disease through 'internal' capacities and through 'authentic' Mongolian foods and cures, in turn, intensified urban–rural interactions and spurred interest in traditional knowledge and food culture.

Terao's chapter explores the notion of wellbeing and its connection to 'eating well' among herders in Uvs, Mongolia. She traces how wellbeing is practised through the belief that consuming the energy derived from traditional foods, such as pastoralist-raised meat, will provide immune-boosting properties to protect against the Covid-19 virus and other illnesses. Also, her chapter discusses the cultural linkage between preparing and eating food, based on customs and notions of healthiness. In Mongolia, there is a strong belief in the

positive effects of meaty, fatty, soupy, 'sealed' and fermented foods on human physical health. Likewise, the customs associated with these food traditions have been maintained for centuries: the twelfth-century text, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, notes the tradition of consuming *airag* (fermented mare's milk) in high quantities during the summer months and reserving meat for consumption in the winter (Anon, 2023). Terao describes how 'sealed' foods such as *buuz* (steamed dumplings), *huushuur* (fried meat pies), and *bitüü shöl* (sealed soup) are believed to retain the best and most nutritious qualities of their constituent ingredients, thereby giving the eater the strength to overcome illness and regain physical energy. In this way, she identifies that wellbeing is not only about the physical properties of food and digestive processes, but is also connected to wider ideas about purity and preserving energy that have spiritual dimensions. These foods and food practices are associated with ideas of health, energy, fullness, power and the wider wellbeing of the household and its family members.

In addition to homeland-based meat dishes, *airag* (fermented mare's milk) is popularly consumed in Mongolia, especially during the summer and early fall, and is believed to have special health benefits due to the probiotic nature resulting from its fermentation processes. Drinking *airag* is also a social activity and is accompanied by *dembee* and other special finger-counting games in some areas of the country. *Dembee* is a finger-counting competition, usually between two people, where the competitors simultaneously sing and perform using hand gestures. The loser must drink a full bowl of *airag*. As Munkherdene notes in his chapter on long-distance migration, some herders have specialised in *airag* production and sell significant quantities at provincial centres or Ulaanbaatar. *Airag* production involves the knowledge and skills to catch foals and train mares for milking, since Mongolian horses are enabled to graze freely in a herd formation (usually with one stallion per thirty geldings, mares and foals), and they often travel far from a household camp. Some herders are starting to use GPS devices to track their horse herds, given the time required to locate the herds if they have travelled far from the household camp location. Morinaga and Batbuyan focus their research on the changes in *airag* culture and its production process in the Mongolian provinces of Övörkhangai and Dundgovi, including changing patterns of work and techniques for fermentation. Some producers began using large-capacity plastic containers and electronic churning paddles to make it in greater quantities. However, they note a return to the use of the traditional container, the leather cowskin bag, in *airag* production, as well as the continuation of milking and fermenting the milk by hand rather than machine. Also, the chapter documents how *airag* was in high demand at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. There was a strong belief – widespread in both urban

and rural areas – that drinking *airag*, and giving it to children, could serve as a preventative treatment for Covid-19.

Both Terao and Morinaga and Batbuyan highlight the social nature of traditional foods and their connection to pastoralist livelihoods and environments. In the far west of Mongolia, in Bayan-Ölgii province, Hirota examines the role of feasting traditions in Mongolian Kazakh society during and after the pandemic of 2020. The study explores the importance of hospitality in the Kazakh community by illustrating the paradoxical situation in which feasting to build social equality and stability and strengthen family ties has become an economic burden for many families. There are several types of feasts with different levels of significance; they also reflect hospitality extended to relations returning from visits to Kazakhstan. Hirota discusses the subtle issues of shame and obligation that feature in attending and hosting feasts, and argues that Kazakhs' effort to maintain social appearances and entertain others has led to further increases in debt in the post-pandemic economic situation. This chapter further illustrates the role of feasts in understandings of social cohesion and identity, which has become practised more frequently as Mongolian Kazakhs return to visit relatives in Bayan-Ölgii in the post-pandemic period.

Locally-sourced medicinal plants from Eastern Siberia also took on new meaning during the pandemic as they transformed into a commodity in high demand for Covid-19 treatment in China. Sayana Namsaraeva illustrates the changing relationship between humans and plants as demand for the *Saposhnikovia* root reached new levels. The new demand led to a large-scale collection effort in the regions of Eastern Siberia where the plant grows in the wild, triggering conflicts between Chinese traders and locals and raising concerns regarding environmental impacts. Namsaraeva illustrates how the root transforms from a wild medicinal plant with local meaning and context into a commodified placeless powder as it works its way through transnational value chains into the international pharmacology industry.

In contrast to the chapters focusing on the preparation of traditional foods and food cultures as a form of nourishment and social cohesion, Namsaraeva demonstrates how a local wild plant becomes stripped of its social and environmental context as it reaches commodity status during the pandemic. These cases are useful to consider together as they provide insights on how particular types of traditional foods, ways of eating and traditional plants took on new values during the pandemic. In the cases of sealed foods, *airag* production, and feasts, the household and the household dwelling continued to play an important role in the preparation and serving of foods, and the foods themselves took on special cultural, spiritual and even nationalistic significance. In the case of the wild botanical trade in Eastern Siberia, the plant *Sapozhnikovia* was handled

as a raw ingredient for export to distant markets, a process which created new modes of preparation but also involved competition, conflict and concerns regarding future environmental impacts from mass harvesting.

Urban–rural dynamics and economic relations

The final theme of the book considers urban–rural dynamics and economic relations during and after the pandemic. Two chapters focusing on Kyrgyzstan highlight how economic anxiety and uncertainty affected local attitudes towards foreign investment in mining as well as forms of gender relations, domestic work and forms of entrepreneurship. Kyrgyz households are highly dependent on foreign remittances from workers based mainly in Russia, and this income source became restricted due to border closures during the pandemic. These conditions provoked the rise of new conspiracy theories about the origins of the pandemic as well as shifts in livelihood strategies amongst women who faced multiple challenges, including economic hardship, gender-based violence and lack of government aid and support. These themes contrast with chapters exploring contemporary pastoralism in Mongolia, which introduced the idea of 'suburban pastoralism' as well as changing rural household dynamics that involve the shift of women to county or provincial centres to access schooling for their children in Mongolia. In some cases, rural households move to local county centres during the winter season and hire herders to take care of their livestock. These peri-urban and rural-urban mobilities are also reflected in the digital space, as households living in more remote areas have direct connections to urban-based events through social media, in a two-way traffic.

Takahiro Tomita's chapter provides further insights into contemporary pastoralism in Mongolia and expands on current developments in local food production and its distribution system during the pandemic. It examines the expansion of small-scale, mainly household-based, dairy production in the suburban areas of Erdenet city and Bulgan province. He argues that pastoralists have adapted small-scale and informal dairy production to local environmental, social and economic conditions, with herders making direct sales of household-made products to consumers through social media or to sellers in markets. He writes, 'In small-scale dairy production in suburban areas, gifts and sales to relatives and acquaintances are inextricably linked and maintained through a widespread cooperative relationship between the steppes and urban areas.' These transactions reflect women-led trading processes developed through trust with urban-based market sellers. Also, household production of dairy products (raw milk, sour cream, *aruul*, butter, etc.) is influenced by the household's distance from markets, the types of markets available and the size and composition of

their herds, pasture and workforce. The dairy products trade is also influenced by the cost of preservation and transportation. The chapter strikingly demonstrates how households overcome the challenges of logistics, including the lack of cold storage, through the production of traditional dairy products and the use of fermentation processes that enable longer preservation. Tomita demonstrates the important role of pastoralist household-based dairy production and its role in sustainable livelihoods, despite the focus of government policy on the creation of major supply chains and larger industrial style farms.

In their joint chapter, Murphy, Munkhochir, Byambabaatar and Bayartogtokh take a broader view of urban–rural dynamics to focus on changing herder perceptions of rural geographies, and how these changing dynamics have affected herder identities. They explore herder perceptions of urban–rural difference and related politics and tensions in the context of increasing urbanisation and the migration of youth from their rural birthplaces to pursue urban-based livelihoods. Their research reveals that herder engagement with the livestock product market is an area in which urban–rural frictions play out. Herders express frustration at the policies of urban-based political elites, who they perceived as neglecting the rural economy and abandoning values rooted in rural ways of life, including environmental custodianship. This issue relates to the broader perception that many urban dwellers misunderstand the challenges facing the rural pastoralist economy due to the high price of meat facing consumers in urban markets; urban residents do not understand how the majority of profits are made by middlemen buying meat at low prices from herders. Likewise, their research points out the ways in which demographic shifts caused by herder children leaving the countryside at a young age for primary and secondary school in *soum* and provincial centres, then potentially to university in Ulaanbaatar, leave households with limited labour available for pastoralism. The complex views of herders on urban–rural dynamics are shaped by political policies, social media, news outlets and economic factors – developments that, in turn, are narrowing the space for mutual understanding as well as raising concerns amongst herders regarding the future of pastoralism in the face of quickly shifting demographics.

Finally, the book includes two chapters focusing on economic and political issues in Kyrgyzstan, where urban–rural dynamics also feature in subtle ways. Based on her fieldwork in three regions of Kyrgyzstan: Issyk-Kul, Osh and Bishkek, Enikeeva's chapter focuses on the experiences of Kyrgyz women entrepreneurs during the Covid-19 pandemic. She explores how women living in the cities of Osh, Bishkek and the tourist region of Issyk-Kul found ways to develop small businesses and navigate the complexities of urban dynamics despite experiences of gender-based violence and deteriorating economic conditions. Despite these significant challenges, Enikeeva highlights that women of

all ages and across multiple regions of Kyrgyzstan have continued to find their own ways to devise solutions to economic hardship, while also providing care to their families and performing the social roles expected of them as women.

In the last chapter, Toktomushev examines the impacts of conspiracy theories associated with Sinophobia and mineral extraction development in Kyrgyzstan, and how these ideas have real-world effects. By examining conspiracy theories as 'as mirrors reflecting the social and cultural contexts in which they originate', Toktomushev considers whether they reflect elitism, patriarchy, and patronage as modes of governance in the region. Conspiracy theories are not about truth or falsehood, but about power to affect both political discourses and political practices. These questions became especially relevant as a major riot broke out protesting against Chinese mining in the region of Naryn in 2019 and, in October 2020, Kyrgyzstan experienced a third political revolution which put Sadyr Japarov, a populist who was in prison at the time, into power. Toktomushev's exploration of the changing discourses of resource extraction and development also resonates with Pakulla's chapter, which probes how the pandemic in Mongolia helped to usher in new political subjectivities amongst Mongolian miners who were confronted with stark inequalities between foreign workers' wages and work benefits and their own. She explains that, 'The pandemic brought to light a landscape of complex and evolving class relations and labour dynamics.' In this sense, the economic inequalities exposed by the pandemic had far reaching impacts on politics and political movements that continue to reverberate today.

Conclusion

The book sets out recent themes in changes in Inner Asian pastoralist society concerning herding practices, digital transformation and the evolving relationship between urban and rural places and identities. Rural geographies are undergoing a period of transformation with many complex factors involved, including developments that have been noted by pastoralist scholars across the world such as land fragmentation due to the expansion of commercial crop cultivation and mining, climate change impacts and government policies that are unfavourable to pastoralism. Demographic shifts of women and youth to settled areas and the capital city of Ulaanbaatar to pursue education and urban livelihoods have created strains for household labour and also new anxieties regarding the next generation of pastoralism in Mongolia. We have observed many families who will not have a next generation to take over the herding tradition in Mongolia. In our own research in Bayankhongor in July 2025, we were struck by comments made by multiple families such as 'we don't have a next generation of herders'

and 'children go [to the city] for education and then disappear'. In another interview, an elderly couple expressed the desire to sell their livestock to move to Ulaanbaatar and live with their only son, due to the loneliness of wintering alone in the countryside. These are changes driven by pastoralist households themselves as they navigate contemporary pastoralist livelihoods in an era in which the urban seems to have a magnetic pull on youth, despite the precarity and pollution characterising cities like Ulaanbaatar.

Herders have begun experimenting with a variety of measures to cope with disasters such as *dzud* and Covid and to reduce risk. For example, during this period, it became markedly more common for herders with enough resources to load livestock onto large vehicles and move to pastures hundreds of kilometres away. Compared with previous years, in preparing for harsh winters, herders have established the practice of selling a portion of their herds in the market before winter and using the proceeds to purchase hay and fodder – especially in the Gobi-steppe zones, where this has become something of an annual routine. In these regions, preparations for *dzud* were observed to differ from previous years. Relatively favourable prices for meat and dairy products in the late fall have been one factor encouraging the sales of animals; when the summer is good, the production and sale of dairy products increase noticeably. On the other hand, low prices for livestock by-products such as sheep wool and skins have largely pushed herders toward selling meat in some areas of the country.

The structure of herder households has also changed. Unlike in previous years, when elders would spend the winter only in the *soum* (district) centre to look after school-age children, it has become increasingly common for herders to winter in the provincial centre and even in Ulaanbaatar, following both schoolchildren and university students. Herders have also begun buying apartments in Ulaanbaatar when their children enter university. Consequently, in some cases, a younger child is sent to school in Ulaanbaatar together with an older brother or sister who is already a university student. This aligns with families' aim not to be split across multiple places – the *soum* centre, the provincial centre and the countryside – but to concentrate in just two locations: the countryside and Ulaanbaatar. As a result, to meet the needs of a household divided into two, three or even four parts, there is a need to sell a large number of animals in the autumn. The decline in the number of people available to herd livestock, in turn, seems to compel households to keep their herds to a certain (manageable) size or to hire herders to assist in the pastoralist operation. This indicates a shift away from the earlier pattern of selling relatively few animals and valuing livestock primarily as a visible form of wealth, to an emphasis on herd size and labour concerns.

Another change that emerged in rural areas alongside Covid was digital transformation. Largely due to lockdowns, online business boomed in Ulaanbaatar, and online activity rose markedly in the countryside as well. Digital devices and wireless infrastructure, including access to 4G networks, have enabled some herders to directly market their meat and dairy products to urban dwellers and by-pass middlemen. While this is not the norm yet, it is a promising development and reflects herder entrepreneurship and adaptation of new technologies to complement traditional mobile livelihoods. The widespread use of solar panels for electricity supports digital connection and mobility, enabling herders to live off-grid and maintain highly mobile livelihoods. Social media quickly became part of everyday work – not only for getting and sharing information, staying in touch and entertainment, but also for planning long-distance moves, marketing and selling meat and dairy, and conducting financial transactions. Combined with familiar technologies such as solar electrical systems, satellite televisions, refrigerators and freezers, Korean trucks, Chinese motorcycles and electric churns, these new tools have led many contemporary herders to say, 'We in the countryside now use everything you city people use.'

There are clear shifts in urban–rural relations. Despite the negative stereotypes some city residents hold about rural people, the value of rural products, trusted sources of meat and dairy, remains high though friction still exists due to the role of middlemen in buying fresh products cheaply from herders and selling them for high rates in Ulaanbaatar. Herders located near markets have recognised the supply chain problem as well as urban demand, and are building micro-farms and distribution networks for meat and milk around provincial centres. These networks need not be physical; they can also be online, as shown by the case of Bayankhongor – over 600 kilometres from Ulaanbaatar, locals sell one of the region's branded products, goat *aaruul* (dried curds), via mobile phones, Facebook chats and video calls.

Processes of rural change remain dynamic, reflecting the variability of grasslands themselves. We note the new uncertainties facing pastoralism and ongoing forms of discrimination or 'sedentist bias' facing herders across the globe. These issues are also found in Inner Asia and do not seem to be abating, as the impacts of climate change and government policies favouring extractivist forms of development on pastoralist territories continue to expand. As noted by Scoones (2021), the challenges facing pastoralists are also noticeable in other agrarian societies, as tripartite processes of production, social reproduction and political shifts under global capitalism have major transformative effects on society and environments. These processes warrant further research, particularly in terms of changing gender dynamics, urbanisation processes and the structural changes affecting rural households. This book has endeavoured to emphasise the

experimentation, adaptation and innovations made by pastoralist households, which actively create new methods and strategies to practise mobile pastoralism, express their cultural values and achieve their aspirations. These forms of creative experimentation in rural areas deserve attention and support from scholars working in solidarity with pastoralists to make space for new political possibilities for the future of pastoralism in an era where actors are all too eager to conclude that an 'end of nomadism' is on the horizon.

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PART I

Contemporary Pastoralism

❄ *Chapter 1* ❄

On the Trucks and Trailers: Long-Distance Movement and Digital Transformations among Mobile Pastoralists in Post-Pandemic Mongolia

Gantulga Munkherdene

Introduction

This chapter presents the previously undocumented phenomenon of recent practices of long-distance movement by Mongolian pastoralists with their herds, over a range of 500–1,000 kilometres, using open-bed semi-trailer trucks and trailers. As well as new forms of mobility, it analyses digital transformations in rural areas, which were accelerated by Covid-19 restrictions in 2020–2021, and their connection to current pastoralist mobile strategies. Mongolian mobile pastoralists use technologies intensively in their daily lives, such as solar panels (Sovacool et al., 2011; Hahn, 2022), mobile phones (Hahn, 2021) and Chinese motorcycles (Fraser, 2018). These technologies facilitate and complement Mongolian mobile pastoralism. In the last decade, the wireless infrastructure network has expanded in the countryside, currently providing a coverage of 55.5 per cent with an estimate 48.5 per cent of people using smartphones (Ministry of Digital Development and Communication, 2022: 38–41). However, there is a lack of research about the relationship between these technologies and pastoralist mobility.

Even though the pandemic restricted human movement in many ways, in rural Mongolia, livestock movement for grazing is essential to survival; hence, pastoralist household mobility was not fully restricted by the government-imposed pandemic lockdowns. Indeed, during the pandemic, some pastoralists moved greater distances than customary and intensified their usage of digital technologies. This usage especially enabled pastoralists to reconnect with many acquaintances and old friends through Facebook. They also learned to make video calls, finding that face-to-face conversations via video created a more lively and personal interaction than regular phone calls. As a result, herders began using video calls to view and gather information about their newly reconnected friends'

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local areas, livestock, fences and shelters, and pasture quality. In some cases, this led to visits and the decision by households to spend the winter in each other's regions. For example, in Baatsagaan *soum* of Bayankhongor province, where I conduct fieldwork, in 2020, one of my interlocutors reconnected on Facebook with a friend he had served in the military with over twenty years ago. After sending a friend request, the two began to talk regularly via video call, sharing updates about their lives and livelihoods. The friend turned out to be a pastoralist in the neighbouring province, living in an area with good pasture and water availability and relatively few livestock. Upon learning this, my interviewee eventually decided to move there, a journey of roughly 600 kilometres. I will touch on this case later.

It is also important to understand that many herders had acquired trucks and trailers, or had the financial means to rent them, which made such long-distance movements possible. In other words, these long-distance movements were enabled by both expanded social networks, through mobile phones and social media, and by transportation technologies such as trucks and trailers. Consequently, the chapter sheds light on the intersections between traditional pastoralism, technological usage and the adaptive strategies employed by Mongolian pastoralists in the face of the pandemic, climatic and socio-economic changes. It underscores the importance of acknowledging these local initiatives and their role in sustaining pastoral livelihoods and bolstering rural resilience when confronted with environmental hardships.

Through several periods of fieldwork conducted in Bayankhongor and Dundgovi Provinces between the summers of 2022 and 2023, this chapter shows how digital technologies have combined with mobile housing, physical technologies and infrastructure to assume an important role in maintaining Mongolian pastoralism in the face of complex social and natural challenges (Sneath, 2003; Sternberg, 2008; Ahearn, 2018b). Integrating digital tools, such as mobile communication, data sharing and information exchange, has transformed traditional practices and forms of mobilities, resource management, community coordination and disaster response, reshaping pastoral livelihoods in the contemporary period.

Mobilities in geography and pastoralists' mobility

Mobility is a foundational concept within geography. The discipline often describes mobilities as the movement of people, goods and ideas across space and places, encompassing social, economic and environmental aspects (Cresswell, 2001, 2012; Adey, 2017). However, before the concept of mobility gained prominence, geographers focused on the notion of movement, particularly in studies

of migration and transport. Today, many geographers use the terms 'movement' and 'mobility' interchangeably. Yet, 'movement is simply an act of displacement that allows things to get from one location to another – a measurable and mappable phenomenon' (Cook, 2018: 141). Mobility, as previously mentioned, encompasses the movement of people, goods and ideas. Geographical studies on mobilities provide insight into how movement shapes human life and how it is influenced by spatial, social, legal and environmental contexts.

Mobility has also been the most important aspect of Mongolian pastoralist livelihoods and societies, who over centuries traversed extensive distances in search of ample grazing land and water sources to sustain their livestock within the territory of their administrative unit (Atwood, 2015). This age-old practice, known as pastoralist mobility or *nüüdel*, constitutes a fundamental aspect of Mongolian culture and way of life, having persisted for centuries (Dulam, 2020). Another type of pastoralist mobility, transhumance or *otor,* is a pivotal mechanism to survive the winter disaster, *dzud* (Murphy 2011). *Dzud* is a natural disaster that occurs where harsh weather conditions cause the death of livestock, which is the primary source of livelihood for pastoralists (Thrift and Ichinkhorloo, 2015; Ahearn, 2018).

In general, in the dry steppe regions of the Gobi, herders tend to move to lower-lying areas during the summer and seek shelter near mountains in the winter. Since open water sources such as rivers and lakes are scarce, they often dig wells to meet their water needs. In contrast, in the forested, mountainous and river-rich regions of the Khangai regions, herders tend to settle near rivers in the summer and move to warmer winter camps in the mountains during the winter. In many cases, winter and spring camps are located together or nearby, while summer and autumn camps are either in the same place or just a few kilometres apart.

During the socialist period, pastoralists' mobilities were organised by the collectives, which meant that herders migrated relatively frequently throughout the year (Fernández-Giménez, 1999). However, after the collapse of socialism in 1990 and the privatisation of livestock, pastoralists lost state support and, due to a shortage of vehicles and machinery, it is argued that movement decreased (e.g. Humphrey and Sneath, 1999). Some researchers argue that pastoralists began to stay longer in the same pastures and the privatisation of livestock led to an increase in herd size, further exacerbating pasture degradation (Batkhishig, 2013). In the same way, perhaps, many argue that this way of life now confronts considerable challenges stemming from climate change, land degradation and urbanisation.

In his essential work, Cresswell (2006) proposes three key dimensions for a comprehensive understanding of mobility, which is useful here to recognise

some types of pastoralists' mobilities. These are movement, representation and experience. Movement focuses on the practical aspects of mobility, such as who moves, how, where and at what speed, forming the foundational elements of mobile practices. Representation concerns the meanings attributed to mobility and how these meanings are constructed and shared through various lenses like policy, media, literature and art. This dimension highlights that discussions about mobility significantly shape our perceptions of it. Lastly, experience emphasises the embodied and lived aspects of human mobility. It explores how mobility is enacted in practice, the sensory and emotional dimensions involved, the bodily sensations it evokes, and the interpersonal interactions it engenders. Together, these dimensions provide a nuanced understanding of mobility as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by practicalities and cultural interpretations.

In this regard, another form of mobility among Mongolian pastoralists must also be stated here. Earlier, I mentioned one type of pastoralist movement – when herders migrate together with their livestock. However, in recent years, there has been a growing trend whereby one member of a herding household temporarily moves to another place without livestock. This form of migration is driven by the increasing involvement of Mongolian herders in diverse economic activities to sustain their livelihoods. My field site investigation in 2022 and 2023, which I refer to as the 'summer without men', encapsulates a phenomenon of many men leaving their homes to seek economic opportunities in towns and gold mining areas (Munkherdene, 2011; Lezak and Munkherdene, 2021), working in construction, trade enterprises and driving coal trucks across the Mongolia–China border. Some pastoralists have established grocery shops in their soum (county or district) and *aimag* (province) centre.

Some researchers may study this pastoralist lifestyle from the perspective of diverse economic activities (Ichinkhorloo, 2018; Waters, 2023). However, I view this phenomenon not only as part of economic diversification but also as a form of herder mobility and movement. Sheller and Urry's (2006) 'new mobilities paradigm' is valuable in explaining my viewpoint. They challenge traditional approaches to mobility that primarily focus on transportation systems, instead emphasising a broader understanding of mobility as a fundamental aspect of contemporary life. So, they argue that mobility is not merely about physical movement but encompasses a wide array of practices, technologies and meanings associated with movement. In the Mongolian countryside, it is common among pastoralist households for the wife to move to the *soum* centre to care for school-aged children, while the husband remains at home to tend the livestock (Ahearn and Bumochir, 2016; Ahearn, 2018a), resulting in the couple living apart for several months.

The main reason why researchers have often considered pastoralist mobility only when herders move with their livestock (e.g. Fernández-Gimenéz and Le Febre, 2006; Dulam, 2020) may lie in the term itself – 'pastoralist'. The term 'herder' or 'pastoralist' (*malchin*) itself seems to be a relatively modern construct that emerged during the socialist era as part of efforts to delineate professions and social stratification, akin to the categorisation of professions at the time, such as workers (*achilchin*) and intellectuals (*seheeten*). Drawing from historical sources such as the thirteenth-century text, the *Secret History of the Mongols* (Onon, 2005), we learn that designations such as horsemen (*aduuchin*), shepherds (*khonichin*) and cattlemen (*üherchin*) existed, possibly with the introduction of the term 'herdsman' (*süregchin*) during the Qing dynasty. Consequently, the modern concept of 'pastoralist' (*malchin*) became more prominent during the state socialist era, defining individuals solely in the context of livestock herding. The prevailing focus on herding livestock, movement patterns and environmental adaptation in studies on pastoralism is likely influenced by Western perspectives that tend to associate one occupation with one specific responsibility. This trend might have been exacerbated by Soviet interventions aimed at modernising Mongolian pastoralists' way of life, leading to an emphasis on the singular dimension of livestock herding or natural resource use in the majority of pastoralism-related research.

Therefore, understanding pastoralist mobility solely in connection with livestock presents a limited perspective on their livelihoods and forms of mobility. Here, mobility is a complex and interconnected phenomenon that shapes social relations, identities and the organisation of space and time (Cresswell, 2011; Adey, 2017). Its nature is also dynamic, constantly shaping and reshaping social landscapes. In the Mongolian context, pastoralist mobility is sometimes so dynamic that, although it is vital for pastoralism, not all forms of movement guarantee success. In the Gobi region, herders who migrated for the winter experienced greater livestock losses due to unexpected heavy snowfall compared to those who stayed at their usual campsites. While herders rely on environmental knowledge to make migration decisions, unpredictable conditions can still lead to losses (Ericksen, 2020). Here, pastoralist mobility appears to be limited mainly by natural and climatic conditions, but it is important not to overlook the social and political constraints shaping their movements. Due to government decisions and administrative boundaries, pastoralist mobility is increasingly governed through contractual and instrumental exchanges, often facilitated by local governors and involving wealthy herders. These exchanges shift power dynamics in favour of elite actors and undermine the moral economy of mutual aid that has historically sustained pastoralism (Murphy, 2018).

Many external factors influence herder mobility. These include the market, international development projects and programmes, and herder knowledge, methods and technologies accompanying them. Some of these external influences, often coming from the government and development agencies, promote the idea that mobility is inefficient and that pastoralists should settle down and adopt intensive livestock production (Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry, 2018). However, as highlighted in various studies mentioned earlier, mobility is a fundamental aspect of pastoralist livelihood and human life more broadly. Restricting or discouraging it can lead to negative consequences that are often not fully understood.

Digital technologies and mobilities

Without a doubt, one of the main changes in rural Mongolia after the Covid-19 pandemic is the usage of digital technologies. A considerable portion of rural families, 97.7%, are equipped with mobile phones. Among them, 19.7% possess basic mobile phones, 48.5% own smartphones, and 31.8% possess both devices. Additionally, 55.5% of countryside households have access to the internet, with 24.6% relying on fixed wireless connections and 73.1% utilising mobile broadband (Ministry of Digital Development and Communication, 2022: 38–41).

Notably, pastoralists' environment is not solely confined to the natural realm, as they are equally immersed in the digital sphere. This condition helps us highlight pastoralists' more diverse livelihoods. It appears that scholarly discourse on Inner Asian pastoralists often neglects the multifaceted nature of their economic activities or spaces of social engagement. This tendency is particularly evident when examining dominant academic themes concerning Mongols, including pastoralism, nationalism and environmental studies, wherein discussions primarily revolve around livestock herding, leaving other economic activities understudied.

During my fieldwork, I observed that, alongside their traditional pastoral practices, pastoralists are also involved in various activities in the digital space. Some have taken the initiative of forming a Facebook group to sell dairy products, using online banking. Others shop online through Facebook, ordering products from the distant capital city, despite it being several hundred kilometres away, and remarkably receiving their orders within a mere three days. Notably, these transactions bypass formal postal services, relying instead on local transport drivers, friends and relatives as reliable shipping mechanisms. The foundation of social trust in these networks is perceived to be more dependable than official channels and, with the integration of digital technology, financial transactions,

banking and other services have become increasingly prevalent among rural pastoralist communities.

These instances are not merely indicative of how market dynamics or social changes influence pastoralists; rather, they illuminate the richness and complexity of their contemporary lives. It becomes apparent that many pastoralists have diversified their income streams by engaging in ancillary businesses alongside their traditional pastoral activities. In this regard, the many-sided economic pursuits of pastoralists challenge preconceived notions about their way of life. The prevailing policies of the government and developmental projects may have overlooked the dynamic adaptability and resourcefulness displayed by these communities in navigating market forces and embracing digital technologies. These emerging economic practices demonstrate how pastoralists have diversified their livelihood strategies, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of their contemporary realities.

Related to my study, the mobility paradigm in geography also emphasises the role of technology in transforming mobility patterns, such as digital communication technologies enabling virtual mobilities. It explores how cultural norms, identities and practices influence mobility choices and experiences. The internet, social media and mobile devices allow people to communicate, work and interact without the need for physical travel (Sheller and Urry 2006: 218). This virtual mobility changes how people connect across distances and create new social and economic networks.

During Covid-19, while the movement of officials and staff in the district centre was restricted, herder mobility was not. In the past, when needed, local officials would visit herders by vehicle to check where they were camping. However, during the lockdown, they mostly relied on Facebook video calls and mobile phones to collect this information. Even the annual nationwide livestock census held every December was, in some cases, conducted not through in-person visits, but by gathering livestock numbers from herders using these technologies. As a result, new Facebook groups and chats for soum and bag-level administration communication were created and became more active. Local government officials began regularly posting official announcements and updates in these groups, while herders and citizens frequently posted lost-and-found animal notices and daily goods for sale. Officials also started sharing important information via Facebook chat, and herders and other citizens began sending photos or scans of their personal documents, such as ID cards, through these platforms. This practice continues today, reflecting a broader shift toward 'e-governance' methods in rural Mongolia.

Likewise, Urry (2007) analyses how digital technologies not only enhance and facilitate physical movements but also create new forms of virtual mobility,

significantly influencing social practices, economic systems and cultural interactions. However, the existing literature on mobilities and digital technologies mostly focuses on urban space and not on mobile pastoralists. This chapter builds on and enhances this existing work by outlining another analytical direction to understand how mobile pastoralists live in and with digital technology and how this might offer new insights into the digital agency of pastoralists on the steppe.

Herder long-distance movements on trucks and trailers

Using three ethnographic cases I collected from my field sites, this section argues that some pastoralists still move great distances by using 'coal' trucks (semi-trailers or large trucks typically used for coal mineral transport) and trailers combined with digital technologies. Unlike the traditional description of Mongolian pastoralists' use of motorcycles, small vehicles or pack animals such as camels, yaks and oxen, this is a new way to overcome the difficulties of a hard winter. Although some pastoralists started using motorised vehicles during the era of state collectives, the use of large trucks and trailers for long-distance migration of households and herds has not been studied before.

While trucks can offer some advantages to herders to quickly escape severe winter conditions, such as faster transport and the reduced risk of animal loss during harsh weather conditions, there is a strong argument for building a coordinated effort between the government, NGOs and local communities (Thrift and Ichinkhorloo, 2015). By taking a multi-faceted approach that combines early warning systems, provision of essential resources, livestock insurance (Murphy and Ichinkhorloo, 2024), livelihood diversification, local government capacity (Ahearn, 2018b), infrastructure development and community-based disaster risk reduction, it is possible to reduce the impact of *dzud* on herders and their communities.

The first case concerns a family from Baatsagaan *soum* in Bayankhongor province, located in the southwest of Mongolia, who faced the challenging winter of 2020. Baatsagaan is a steppe and semi-arid area where local pastoralists primarily herd the five traditional types of livestock, except for yaks. Like other herders in the area, they live in a traditional Mongol *ger* (mobile dwelling made of collapsible wooden lattice walls, felt insulation and canvas cover) and use Chinese motorcycles, Korean mini-trucks and a Toyota jeep, along with solar panels, satellite TV, refrigerators and smartphones. In response to the harsh conditions, they made a significant decision to relocate westward to Gobi-Altai province, over 600 kilometres from their home. It was the first time they had decided to move such a long distance to pastureland in another province. During the Covid-19 pandemic, their two teenage sons were attending school

from home online, which made the move easier. The new location had abundant grass and fewer livestock.

The family used large trucks to transport their animals in five separate loads, completing the move within two days, despite the challenges of the pandemic. Prior to the relocation, they informed the local government and obtained official permission from the administration in the new pasture area. This efficient strategy proved highly effective, resulting in no animal losses and allowing them to retain their primary source of livelihood. Moreover, the herd promptly gained access to fresh grass and water without depleting their physical strength. In stark contrast, a traditional migration on foot would have necessitated a protracted journey lasting approximately a month, leading to substantial losses among the livestock. The traditional route would have entailed traversing unfavourable pastures, hindering the rejuvenation of the livestock, and encountering areas with no network connectivity.

The inception of this transformative relocation was rather serendipitous, starting with a Facebook encounter between the older brother of the family's wife and an old-time friend from his army service days almost two decades ago. Facebook video calls facilitated a consistent connection between the parties, enabling discussions about old memories and current life circumstances. As autumn approached, the family began to express concerns regarding suitable winter locations and how to navigate the impending harsh winter conditions. During one of their regular video calls, the friend, who hailed from Gobi-Altai province, proposed that the family relocate to his location due to its greener pastures. Subsequently, upon sharing photographs of the pasture and engaging in direct Facebook video calls from the pasture, the family decided to assess the location. Consequently, the brother and husband of the family embarked on a journey of over 600 kilometres to visit the pasture and reunite with their old friend. While the destination proved suitable, the intervening pasture along the traditional route posed significant challenges, featuring scarce grass which might endanger weaker livestock.

During the pandemic, the closure of the border with China resulted in local drivers, who typically drive coal trucks through Omnogobi province to the border, returning home and awaiting further instructions from their employers. Seizing this opportune circumstance, a driver hailing from Baatsagaan *soum*, with prior experience in loading animals onto trucks in Omnogobi province, offered his services to manage the movement of livestock for a fee on the *soum*'s Facebook group. After seeing a Facebook post by the driver about transporting livestock with a large truck, the Baatsagaan family contacted the driver and agreed on a price for the service. The driver offered his services for five loads at 1.7 million tugrugs per load at the time of relocation in 2020, amounting to a total pay-

ment of 8.5 million tugrugs (currently around 2,470 USD) for approximately 1,100 head of sheep and goats. However, the urgency of the situation drove prices up, as the demand for such services escalated among other pastoralists, and the pricing subsequently increased to 10,000 tugrugs per animal (around 2.90 USD) at the beginning of winter.

Subsequently, during the following spring of 2021, the family reverted to the traditional method of migration on foot for their return journey to Baatsagaan. This decision was facilitated by the favourable conditions resulting from heavy snow during the previous winter, which yielded green pastures in the spring. The family's utilisation of local drivers and former coal trucks to relocate their livestock during the pandemic-induced border closure showcases the resourcefulness of pastoralists in navigating challenges. The temporary shift from traditional herding practices to modern transportation methods demonstrates how adaptation and pragmatism play a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods amidst evolving circumstances. Moreover, this family's migration to Gobi-Altai province exemplifies how digital communication and networking platforms played a pivotal role in facilitating the relocation. Without local acquaintances or friends, herders cannot simply move into someone else's pasture. Even if they have obtained official permission from local authorities (Murphy, 2018), these informal social networks are still essential. Facebook enabled them to reconnect with a long-lost friend, who, in turn, offered a promising solution for a more favourable winter pasture. Additionally, members of the family had added many friends from the hosting province to their Facebook accounts for diverse collaboration in the future. Incorporating digital technology allowed for timely decisions and resourceful planning, ultimately safeguarding their livelihood during the harsh winter season.

The second case involves four brothers and their families from Ölziit, Bayankhongor, who embarked on a relocation journey to Khalhgol, Dornod Province, covering approximately 1,400 kilometres using trucks in the late autumn of 2021. To facilitate the move, they used their own trucks and hired additional former coal trucks, to accommodate the large numbers of livestock belonging to the four families. This migration took place during late autumn, and the decision to move was influenced by a family kinship tie, as one of the brothers' daughters had married a resident of Khalhgol, Dornod, whom she met in Ulaanbaatar city. During one of their regular Facebook video calls with the daughter, the parents complained about pasture quality and shared their prediction of how difficult the coming winter would be. The son-in-law intervened in the talk and shared his ideas on some possible winter pasturelands in his homeland.

This idea was discussed intensively among the brothers, and they wanted to take action. Two of the younger brothers travelled to the centre of Dornod

province to meet with the son-in-law's uncle, who possessed extensive knowledge about favourable pastures in the area. After a careful search for several days, they selected an abandoned winter camp with neighbouring local pastoralists at a distance of 15–25 kilometres and a *soum* centre approximately forty kilometres away. They made several video and mobile phone calls from the pasture and local centre to the brothers at home in Bayankhongor so that they could make a decision. They took photos of the grass in the pasture and captured dozens of images to show others.

Unlike the first case, the driver for this relocation was inexperienced and opted for breaks during the journey. They initially delivered the animals to the nearby district of Nalaih, in Ulaanbaatar city, more than 600 kilometres from the home pasture, to allow some time for the recovery of weaker livestock. Subsequently, they completed the last leg of the journey to reach their intended destination. While they did encounter some losses among the livestock, these were not substantial. The total cost of the movement amounted to 4 million *tugrugs* per load, with two loads hired to transport all the livestock. The winter at the new location proved favourable, with tall grass reaching fifty centimetres, providing sufficient sustenance for the livestock, which remained stationary for most of the day. The older brother explained:

> It was not difficult there. The people were very nice. We met two old men who were very good people. They were very nice just like our parents. If the weather was to worsen and we might lose our animals, we didn't know that land very well and the people. Those two old men would come and warn us that it was going to be cold tomorrow or would snow. So, we should take care of our livestock better. They are really good people.

The relocation presented some challenges, notably the lack of adequate phone network and internet connectivity across the migration route, hindering frequent contact with relatives in Bayankhongor and their children attending school in the nearest *soum*. Despite this drawback, the new location offered excellent grazing opportunities for the animals. In the following spring, three of the families returned to their homeland also using trucks to load their livestock, while one family opted to remain in Khalhgol. The older brother also said:

> We [four families] spent the winter nicely. One chose to remain there and is still there. He said that they are going to buy many cows and settle there because they liked it there. The people are super supportive. He said that since he moved all the way there, he will remain there at least for three years. His wife works as a nurse at Khalhgol *soum*. While the wife works, her husband looks after their many animals. They bought lots of cows.

This decision was influenced by several reasonable factors, such as the absence of school-age children, the newly installed 4G network antenna near their location, and the wife's offer of a job as a nurse at a local hospital in Khalhgol. The families in Ölziit now enjoy favourable weather conditions and express their contentment, acknowledging the possibility of returning to Khalhgol if adverse weather conditions arise again, owing to the strong friendships established there.

The third case arises from Dundgovi province, where I met local pastoralists who have been moving around with mobile trailers (*vagonchig*, meaning a small-sized wagon) for the last two decades (see Figure 1.1). Their home *soum* is in Dundgovi, which had faced drought and *dzud* conditions for several years prior to the pandemic and also during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Interestingly, there are limited studies on this movement trend, even though the locals travel hundreds of kilometres across the territories of several provinces continuously.

The herder household I met had four sons – two of them had already established their own households, while the two younger ones still lived at home. Altogether, the extended family lived in three *gers* and migrated together within the same general area. They have been moving across Dornod, Khentii, Sükhbaatar, Dornogobi and Övörkhangai provinces. Additionally, the family has developed a broad network in these provinces and regularly maintains contact through phone and Facebook video calls to foster good relationships and secure future opportunities.

Together, these three households (the parents with unmarried sons and the two households of the married sons) own over 1,000 horses, as well as other livestock such as sheep, goats and camels, although they do not keep cattle. During the summer, they collectively milk more than 120 mares and produce *airag* (fermented mare's milk), transporting nearly a ton of it to Dundgovi province centre within just one or two days for sale. They have regular buyers in Dundgovi, and they explained that the income from selling summer *airag* is used to cover household needs, allowing them to avoid slaughtering other animals and selling the meat. The wife of the household noted with concern that, although summers used to be a time when grass was plentiful and animals grew fat, in recent years, the grass has not grown well. Another challenge they face is that a large silver mine was established near their winter camp and began operations. In response, they built a permanent *ger*-style house at their camp to strengthen their claim to the land.

Figure 1.1: Dundgovi herder household mobile trailer home, facilitating continuous movement across provinces. Photo by the author.

During our meetings in the summer of 2024, the matriarch of the household shared how, after living far from their homeland for several years and returning, her children were so moved by memories of their birthplace that they came back with tears in their eyes. She even recalled how their livestock seemed to remember the land and ran toward it (for further discussion on horses' memory of their homeland, see Bumochir, 2023). Also, the family expressed their concerns about the dry summers that have affected their home pasturelands for over ten years, forcing them to move frequently. As a result, for many herders who move frequently, traditional dwellings like *gers* have become impractical in the Gobi region. Pastoralists from these areas have opted for trailers due to their convenience for relocation. According to the locals, the idea of using trailers for movement was inspired by the trailers used by road construction workers during the Soviet era, and pastoralists adopted the same type, known as *vagonchig* (a loanword from Russian). Later, skilled individuals in the capital city began to create or customise trailers specifically for pastoralists' use, available in different sizes and at various prices. Currently, the average price of a trailer ranges from 22 to 32 million *tugrugs* (6,500 to 9,500 USD).

During one of their recent movements to Khentii province in the autumn of 2022, my informant family had an established network built over the years, which meant they needed relatively little time to prepare a winter camp, a well and pasture compared to previous moves. The wife of the household says:

> We know many pastoralists in that area because we lived there for years. At the time, I simply made a few phone calls and Facebook video calls to old friends, as usual, and transferred some money using an e-banking app to pay for the winter camp rent and cover expenses such as gifts (like candies, pastries and vodka) and petrol for a friend who travelled to meet people in the area. Afterwards, we moved all the animals and followed them with a trailer.

The wife of the household pronounced the English word 'video call' very clearly, using the correct pronunciation 'call', which I found interesting. In my observation, urban residents or children learning English often mispronounce the word as 'kall', so her accurate pronunciation stood out in contrast. Once again, in this example, digital technologies, particularly the 4G network, social media, various applications and smartphones, played a vital role in managing the long-distance movement and decisions regarding where to move. This usage has become an essential part of the everyday life of pastoralists. For this reason, they need to 'follow the 4G network' (Munkherdene, forthcoming) and seek good grass and clean water sources. Many pastoralists prefer to stay close to locations with sufficient 4G coverage to use their smartphones conveniently and enjoy social media content, such as horse racing, traditional wrestling and artistic videos.

In this context, this chapter argues that the digital transformation among pastoralists in rural Mongolia represents one of the most significant changes following the Covid-19 pandemic. It highlights the impact of this transformation on the mobility patterns of pastoralists today and suggests that we develop a deeper understanding of this interplay between technology and traditional practices. Furthermore, it encourages further studies on the role of digital technology and its interactions with various aspects of life in rural regions, extending beyond just urban spaces. Such an exploration could provide valuable insights into how digital expansions reshape social, economic and cultural dynamics in these communities, potentially leading to more informed policymaking and support strategies for rural populations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the digital transformation among pastoralists in rural Mongolia, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, represents a pivotal shift in their traditional lifestyles. This transformation has facilitated the adoption of new technologies, such as accessing 4G wireless networks, smart phones and ap-

plications which have become integral to their everyday lives. Even as physical mobility is an essential part of Mongolian pastoral life, digital communication technologies have introduced a new dimension, enabling virtual mobilities that transcend geographical constraints. This duality in mobility reflects a complex adaptation that blends tradition with modernity, providing pastoralists with new opportunities and challenges in navigating their environment.

The integration of digital technologies has not only influenced pastoralists' mobility patterns but also reshaped social and economic interactions across distances. With the rise of virtual networks, pastoralists are now able to connect and communicate in ways that were previously unimaginable. As pastoralists in Mongolia continue to adapt to these changes, it becomes crucial to consider the socio-cultural implications and to ensure that technological adoption enhances, rather than detracts from, their resilience and self-sufficiency.

Ultimately, the ongoing transformation among Mongolia's mobile pastoralists underscores the dynamic relationship between technology, mobility and cultural identity. As traditional movement practices intertwine with recent innovations, it is essential to approach these changes with a nuanced understanding that respects the historical context and future aspirations of pastoral communities. By fostering a dialogue that acknowledges both the potential and the perils of digital change, stakeholders can work collaboratively to create an inclusive framework that supports sustainable development and the continuation of Mongolia's rich mobile pastoral heritage.

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❄ *Chapter 2* ❄

Pastoral Society Resilience to Covid-19 Social Disaster in Mongolia's Bulgan and Sukhbaatar Provinces

Takahiro Ozaki

Introduction: The Covid-19 pandemic in Mongolia

In late 2022, Mongolian pastoral society started to enjoy the post-Covid-19 situation, as they were able to resume activities that involved face-to-face gatherings of many people. Naadam, the nomadic sports summer event, was restarted as well as local worship of *ovoo* (cairn, see also Dumont, 2024) monuments held by kinship-based groups, and other face-to-face gatherings held for various purposes, with virtually no restrictions. I observed an *ovoo* festival held to celebrate an ancestor of a kinship group in Bulgan Province in August 2022 and heard about their *soum*'s Naadam in which they took part as trainers of racehorses in Sukhbaatar Province. In rural Mongolia, pastoralists usually live dispersed over such a wide area that events like Naadam present a significant chance to meet members of their local society in one place (Ozaki, 2002: 109). In this sense, they restored their society, which faced restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic did not cause high human or livestock mortality in Mongolia. Considering that Mongolia neighbours China, where the pandemic originated, the country's early-stage number of pandemic casualties was remarkably low. The Mongolian government was very quick to adopt countermeasures to the pandemic, including banning international travel and isolating suspicious cases. The government restricted the movement of people between Mongolia and China in both directions on 1 February 2020 (Bayasgalan et al., 2020: 1). Then, all international flights departing from and arriving in Mongolia were stopped. The restriction of movement for travellers between China and Mongolia lasted for nearly three years. For example, the major border checkpoint of point of Zamyn-Üüd reopened on 8 January 2023 (JETRO, 2023). As a result, Mongolia minimised the transmission of Covid-19 at an early stage (Ozaki, 2021: 115).

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Although the Covid-19 pandemic in Mongolia was not so severe, the restriction of people's domestic movements affected pastoralists' lives negatively. The government's reaction to restrict movement was a routine response in Mongolia, where various human and animal epidemics often occur and the medical system is vulnerable. This highlights cultural factors in Mongolia's case related to its history of pastoralism. Herding livestock is accompanied by a risk of infection from bacilli and viruses. This threatens livestock and human health, exemplified by past outbreaks of the bubonic plague and anthrax, both endemic in Mongolia (Fijn and Terbish, 2021). Local epidemics, such as foot and mouth disease, which does not spread to humans, are reported regularly in Mongolia (Gerelmaa et al., 2020: 1708). In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic might be considered a social disaster, i.e. one caused by human activity, in this case human movement spreading the virus, unlike an environmental disaster such as *dzud* (cold and snow disaster). This chapter compares research data collected before and after the pandemic in two different areas: one in Bulgan Province representing what I call 'suburban pasture', and one in Sukhbaatar Province representing 'remote pasture.' Based on the research data and Mongolian national statistical data (NSOM), the chapter argues that the pandemic acted as an accelerator of change in Mongolian pastoralism, like past environmental and social disasters. For example, the collapse of socialism in the early 1990s caused a shift to more self-sufficient pastoralism, while *dzud* at the end of the twentieth century drove pastoralists to suburban pasture areas as will be discussed below (Ozaki, 2019: 39–53).

Disease and pandemics in Mongolia

Historically speaking, the most famous pandemic in Mongolia was the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century. *Bacillus pestis*, thought to originate from Central Eurasia, spread rapidly across the Eurasian trading bloc which emerged with the Mongolian Empire (Harayama, 1999: 115). At that time, significant numbers of people and commodities moved over the steppe where rodents harbouring *Bacillus pestis* lived. Today's economic globalisation, migrants and tourism provide a similar background for the Covid-19 pandemic.

If an infectious disease occurs in Mongolia today, quarantine, road closure and a ban on livestock movement (if the disease is a risk to livestock) are implemented for set periods and over defined areas, from several households to the provincial level, according to the level of seriousness. To my knowledge, Mongolians are relatively accepting of restrictions on human and livestock movement in response to an infectious disease and are willing to move frequently and far. The former Mongolian President Battulga was also quarantined after he

visited China and met with Xi Jinping on 27 February 2020, when the Covid-19 virus began spreading (Baljmaa, 2020: para.5).

During past disease outbreaks originating in China, the Mongolian government did not hesitate to stop human exchange between the countries. For example, when six people returning from the city of Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, China, were diagnosed with SARS in April 2003, the Mongolian government quickly stopped the operation of passenger trains between Ulaanbaatar and Hohhot and advised 430 returnees to stay at home for two weeks. The WHO delegate in Mongolia commented that this could be an excessive response, but the government went ahead with it (Lhagvasuren 2003: para.9, p. 18).

Another factor in Mongolia's favour was timing. The Covid-19 pandemic was accelerated by the mass movement of people around the Chinese Lunar New Year (25 January 2020). In usual years, the dates of the Chinese (*Chunjie*) and Mongolian (*Tsagaan Sar*) Lunar New Year are almost the same. During the Mongolian Tsagaan Sar holiday, a mass movement of people occurs during the celebrations, including an increase in gatherings to eat and drink together. However, Tsagaan Sar during the first year of the pandemic occurred on 24 February 2020, one month later than Chunjie in 2020, as an intercalary month was imposed before the new year only in the Mongolian (Tibetan) calendar. On 10 February 2020, Mongolia's President stated that citizens should refrain from visiting relatives during Tsagaan Sar in response to the spread of Covid in China. Moreover, as the high season of Mongolian tourism is in the summer, in winter, international travellers to and from Mongolia are mainly Mongolians (Ozaki, 2021: 117). This fact also helped the Mongolian government to quickly stop the inflow of people during the pandemic. However, such measures could not completely prevent people and the virus from coming in, especially after variant strains appeared. Domestic infections increased rapidly in March 2021. Some Mongolians whom I met in the countryside in 2023 said that Covid-19 became more prevalent in 2021, and most Covid-19 deaths occurred in 2021 in Mongolia.[1]

The pandemic restrictions affected Mongolian people severely as their lives were based on international and domestic free movement. Before the pandemic, it was common for people to travel abroad for disease treatment and to buy commodities such as cars, electronic devices and building materials. Major destinations were the US, Japan, South Korea and China, depending on their needs. Some stayed abroad for several years for study and work. It was estimated that 190,000 Mongolians were living overseas in April 2020, with 50,000 in South Korea alone (Anudari, 2020: para.2), while the total population

1. By the end of 2022, 2,016 people had died from Covid-19 in Mongolia (WHO Covid-19 dashboard https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?m49=496andn=c).

of Mongolia was approximately 3,300,000 in 2020. Some returned to Mongolia by special chartered flights during the pandemic, though many stayed abroad. They communicated by social media such as Facebook. A Mongolian driver whom I hired during field research in 2023 advised his son working in South Korea not to return to Mongolia. Many Mongolians were afraid that the Covid-19 virus would flow into Mongolia with returning citizens.

On 14 March 2022, the government changed the entry regulations for all foreign countries and no longer required testing, vaccination or quarantine (Amicus Mongolia, 2023: para.1–4). Thus, special procedures for Covid-19 prevention were ended earlier than in other major countries, such as Japan. Regular international flights were restored, first with flights between Ulaanbaatar and Seoul, then Frankfurt, Istanbul and Narita, Japan, mainly operated by Mongolian Airlines.

In conclusion, Mongolia managed the risks of Covid-19 rather well on a national level. However, the restrictions on domestic movement still affected people at the local level, including pastoralists, whose livelihood is based on the movement of people and animals. Also, relatives, such as children or grandchildren, may have been based abroad for study and work and faced difficulties in returning home after the Mongolian borders were closed.

Disasters' effects on Mongolian pastoralism

Socio-economic damage such as that caused by the pandemic can be considered a disaster. As Oliver-Smith (2002: 24) pointed out, disasters occur at the intersection of nature and culture. In other words, a necessary condition for a disaster is the conjunction of a human population and a potentially destructive agent (Oliver-Smith, 1999: 30). From such a viewpoint, an event that originated from biological or ecological phenomena and had a detrimental effect on a society can be recognised as a disaster. Amongst disasters in Mongolia, so-called environmental disasters, usually in the form of severe winters or *dzud*, are relatively well noted (Nakamura, 2019: 103). However, more human-originated disasters, such as epidemics or social disorders, called 'social disasters,' have been less noted. Drastic changes in socio-economic systems, such as the political revolution, the collapse of state socialism and the disbanding of herder collectives (*negdel*) in the early 1990s, which all happened in modern Mongolian history, may also be viewed as types of social disaster, because they changed Mongolians' relationship with nature. Fernández-Gimenéz (1999: 330) pointed out that the overall radius of pastoralist movement decreased after socialist collectivisation. Then, the collapse of socialism freed pastoralists from the collectives' orders, while pastoralists were also exposed to more economic risks and the need to gener-

ate cash income (Ozaki, 2019: 33). Changing forms of land use are common because of both social and environmental disasters in Mongolia.

Shinoda (2017: 73) drew attention to the multiple dimensions of major environmental disasters in Mongolia, including the '4Ds': drought, dust storms, *dzud*, and desertification, which are interrelated. *Dzud,* which refers to a winter disaster in Mongolia, is not just a synonym for extreme climate phenomena, as Natsagdorj (2001: 4) points out. Pastoralists traditionally recognize *dzud* as natural and weather conditions that cause significant animal loss. In sum, *dzud* is a climate phenomenon that causes socio-economic damage to a human society – hence it is an environmental disaster. Similarly, the spread of Covid-19, a phenomenon caused by human activity, caused damage to society and can be classified as a social disaster.

In the early 1990s, many people who became jobless due to the collapse of socialism became pastoralists to produce their own food (Ozaki, 2019: 41). Many new herders joined groups of existing pastoral households (*hot ail* in Mongolian) to increase their livestock as quickly as possible, because leaders of pastoral groups were usually experienced pastoralists from the socialist era, holding relatively more livestock and equipment distributed from disbanded collectives (Ozaki and Takakura, 2021: 9–10).

They employed techniques of pastoralism that are mainly tuned to maximise the increase of livestock, utilising regular and relatively long-distance seasonal movement to graze their livestock adequately. Sneath (1999: 225–228) mentioned socialist-era pastoralism as 'yield-focused', in contrast to 'subsistence', which tends to conserve livestock. However, as the socialist state's distribution network collapsed along with the economic system, pastoralists tended to be more self-sufficient than before due to the absence of state support at the time. The collapse of the socialist system led to severe inflation and shortages of goods and food. Herders could sell livestock to purchase some of the limited variety of commodities available in markets and shops (Ozaki, 2019: 79–81). When I started field research in the Mongolian countryside in the spring of 1997, buying clothes was not easy, though one could purchase flour and tea. Therefore, pastoralism in Mongolia during the 1990s was a strange mixture of 'yield-focused' and 'subsistence' during this period of political transition and economic hardship.

As a result, livestock numbers increased, and herders became more vulnerable to environmental disasters (Ariunaa et al., 2022: 1185). The *dzud* disasters from winter 1999 to 2002 sharply decreased livestock numbers. They washed away almost all the increases in livestock seen since the collapse of socialism. For pastoralist households, these disasters meant a rapid decrease in income. If the total number of livestock decreases below the threshold that can reproduce

as much livestock as they utilise in one year, herding becomes at least temporarily unviable. During the 1990s, the threshold for a household composed of a couple and small children was about 200–300 sheep/goats according to my field research data in Sukhbaatar (Ozaki, 2019: 158). Some of these small-scale livestock owners turned to 'suburban' pastures near provincial and *soum* centres, especially those who lost a lot of livestock because of the disaster and had few livestock left. When I started my field research in Bulgan 2007, I was astonished at the high population density of suburban pasture where pastoralists in general were small-scale livestock owners and had moved into the area recently (Ozaki, 2019: 183–185).

Around the beginning of the twenty-first century, Mongolia received an increase in investment from foreign countries, mainly focusing on mining but also directed to urban and rural infrastructures such as roads and cellular phone coverage. Consequently, cities restored market functions, and city dwellers started to purchase dairy products, which motivated pastoralists to produce more (Ozaki, 2019: 47). Based on my field observations in Bulgan province, the use of suburban pastures emerged, where herders conducted a different strategy of pastoralism from those living in more remote pastures. From my observations, pastoralists living in more remote areas mainly relied on selling livestock and cashmere for cash income, reflected in my case study in Sukhbaatar province (Ozaki, 2019: 53). The characteristics of suburban pastures in Bulgan include mobile network coverage and paved roads, which enables pastoralists living there to sell dairy products such as fermented mare's milk (*airag*) and raw milk. Selling dairy products does not reduce livestock numbers, unlike selling livestock for meat. As a result, pastoralists who owned fewer livestock found advantages from the suburban pastures. They came partly from remote pastures where they had lost livestock due to the *dzud* disaster or other reasons, and partly from cities where they had become jobless or pensioners. In my case study in Bulgan, eleven households living in the suburban areas had moved from remote pasture while nine households came from the provincial centre (Ozaki, 2019: 185).

In the locations where I conducted research from 2007 to 2010 in Bulgan province, suburban pasture areas closer to provincial and *soum* centres were favourable for those who owned fewer livestock. However, this did not attract all kinds of pastoralists. Once suburban pastures became crowded with households and livestock, it became better for herders to live in one place all year without moving and to assert their right to utilise the pasture (Ozaki, 2019: 186). Because pastureland is not privatised in Mongolia, the best way for a household to keep other pastoralists away from a portion of the suburban pasture is by staying there and watching it all the time. If they find that the amount of pasture vegetation is

insufficient, they must purchase fodder from outside without moving elsewhere to feed their livestock by grazing.

For those who own a lot of livestock, purchasing fodder is too costly. If they keep livestock in less populated areas, they can feed them by making frequent seasonal movements instead (Ozaki, 2019: 187). In addition, they have enough livestock to survive by selling meat (livestock) and cashmere, which requires less labour than milking and producing dairy products for sale. For example, let us compare the selling of meat and *airag* based on prices in Bulgan in 2013. One adult male sheep and 200 kilograms of *airag* (fermented horse milk) were almost the same price. To get 200 kg of *airag* from a mare requires about seventy days of milking and a long time spent stirring for the fermentation process every day. On the other hand, if a pastoralist family owns a mid-sized sheep flock (about 300), 150 lambs can be born a year generally (Ozaki, 2019: 358). Therefore, it is obvious that the cash income from selling *airag* cannot be comparable to selling sheep from the viewpoint of the amount of labour required.

Therefore, it is reasonable for wealthy pastoralists with large flocks to keep living in remote pasture. As a result, two types of strategies came to coexist in Mongolian pastoral society after the *dzud*, and this situation lasted until the Covid-19 pandemic, the latest social disaster in the winter of 2020. Mongolian pastoralist strategy has been changing according to external factors in this way.

The pandemic as a social disaster: from statistics

During the pandemic, researchers could not conduct field research and direct observation in Mongolia, as international and domestic movement was restricted. After the summer of 2022, we investigated what kind of social change had happened during and after the pandemic. I conducted fieldwork in Bulgan *soum* in Bulgan province located in central Mongolia in the spring of 2023 (n=9) and Ongon *soum* in Sukhbaatar province located in eastern Mongolia in the summer of 2023 (n=24) using semi-structured interviews during visits to herders' *ger* (traditional mobile homes). All the households I visited in 2023 were old acquaintances that I had met 15–25 years before. Therefore, the main questions concerned their family history and changes in pastoralism since my last visit, mainly focusing on the situation during and after the pandemic. Using this methodology, I clarified recent changes in herder strategies. This analysis addresses the research question of whether the pandemic was a social disaster and if it triggered a change in their pastoral management and land use strategies. I took Bulgan *soum* in Bulgan province as a case of suburban pasture and Ongon *soum* in Sukhbaatar province as an example of remote pasture, in order to compare two different strategies in herding.

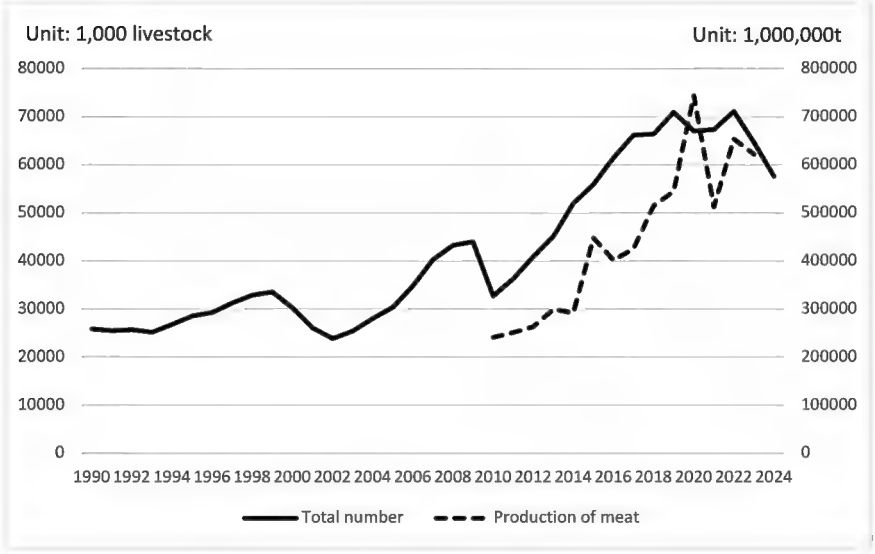

Figure 2.1: Total numbers of livestock / production of meat in Mongolia (NSOM 2025).

Mongolian national statistics indicate that the total number of livestock slightly declined in 2020, for the first time in a decade (see Figure 2.1, NSOM 2025: database). After the extreme *dzud* disaster in the early 2000s, national livestock numbers generally increased steadily. According to my interview data collected in Sukhbaatar in 1998, 1999, 2001 and 2008, cattle and horses were heavily affected by the disaster from 1999 to 2002 (Ozaki, 2019: 227–228). Pastoralists in remote areas increasingly relied on selling meat (sheep) and cashmere (goats) for their livelihoods. Generally speaking, in these areas, cattle are vulnerable to deep snowfall and horses are generally kept as prestige items (racehorses). In this area, camels have tended to lose importance as almost every household owns a vehicle to transport heavy goods like *gers*. The only exception was in 2010, when a national-scale *dzud* happened again and led to a sharp decline in livestock numbers. However, after 2018, numbers stabilised from 2019 to 2022, showing a temporary increase. Then, *dzud* happened during the 2022/2023 winter and caused a sharp decline in livestock numbers (WHO, 2024: para.2). We can see from Figure 2.1 that a plateau started just before the Covid-19 pandemic and continued during and after the pandemic.

If we think about the causes of change, there can be several possibilities: 1) meat began to be exported in greater quantities, as in the socialist era; 2) livestock numbers got close to the carrying capacity and became challenging to increase; or 3) domestic consumption of livestock increased. The first op-

tion can be easily rejected because the total amount of meat export decreased drastically in 2020 and 2021. Option two is difficult to deduce only through statistics, so we will need to evaluate using field research data. However, many adult livestock were lost in 2018 and 2021, though a third less compared to the large-scale *dzud* in 2010 (NSOM, 2025). As for option three, the production of meat (beef, mutton and goat) was very high in 2020 and 2022, whereas the production of meat started increasing from 2015 if we focus on the long-term trend of change (Figure 2.1). In general, it is difficult to identify only one cause of change due to complex factors. As for options two and three, there is a possibility that they are interrelated, although it is very difficult to understand the interrelated dynamics.

In addition, it is important to consider that disasters often do not act as generators of change but as accelerators of change. For example, privately owned livestock existed even before the collapse of socialism. In this viewpoint, the collapse of socialism just furthered the growth of already-existing private livestock, even though these numbers may have included the livestock of others entrusted to a pastoralist household. Similarly, pastoralist households existed in suburban pastures during the 1990s, even though in smaller numbers than after the disaster which occurred at the end of the twentieth century (Ozaki, 2019: 214). Thus, the same process that was observed following the end of socialism may be going on again, this time caused by the Covid-19 pandemic social disaster.

A case study of Bulgan *soum* in Bulgan province: suburban pasture

My field site in Bulgan *soum* is located at its northwest border, about fifteen kilometres away from the provincial centre. As a typical suburban pasture, a main paved road runs through this area with good mobile phone coverage. Pastoralists' seasonal movements are minimal; they move to summer camps only 2–3 km away and stay until autumn. Livestock movement patterns are similar, although there are some exceptions such as when herders hire labourers to take livestock outside the area (Ozaki, 2019: 186). Additionally, livestock belonging to pastoralist households from outside this area who want to sell dairy products move into this area in the summer.

I carried out field research using observation and semi-structured interviews in the summer of 2007 and the spring of 2008, visiting twenty households. All interviewee names have been pseudonymised in this chapter. Mr Davaa was a key informant who introduced me to other households; he became a pastoralist after he retired from a city job and was famous for losing few livestock during the severe *dzud* of 1999. I visited Mr Davaa in 2010 just after the *dzud* to ask him about the damage, whilst I did not visit others. I revisited him again in

the summer of 2022 and the spring of 2023. I talked with his wife and made general observations around the area because he was sick and unable to talk. I asked his wife about the location of other previous informants, and we visited those in the area in spring 2023.

My impression during the summer of 2022 was that the total number of pastoralist households seemed unchanged. However, the 2023 interview data revealed that compared to 2007/2008, only nine out of twenty households remained there, and they often entrusted part of their livestock, especially sheep and goats, to other families from outside the area. Frequent migration can be validated by satellite images from Google Earth which were taken in 2005, 2010, 2018 and 2024. Some livestock pens had disappeared whilst others were added at different locations, implying that migration occurred.

As most of the husbands in these households were middle-aged or older in 2007/08, their age could influence outcomes. It was evident that when a pastoral household's wife passed away, they tended to sell all their livestock and either move to cities or entrust them to close relatives, such as a child or grandchild. There was only one instance of a divorced man living alone in the suburban pasture; however, there were three cases of women whose husbands had either died or become unable to work due to a serious illness, who lived independently. This trend may reflect ideas about the gender division of labour, with women responsible for domestic tasks and milking necessary for producing and selling dairy products in the summer. If they abandoned pastoralism, their winter camps could be leased or sold to others. Alternatively, they could dismantle wooden winter pens and sell them as lumber. We can observe that pastoralists in the suburban pasture were more flexible than might be supposed.

During the pandemic, they managed to stay connected with a limited number of city dwellers (especially close relatives) for access to the market, though their lives tended to be more self-sufficient than before. Communication with outside people took place mainly by smartphone; in-person communication for buying and selling decreased, including selling dairy products. In addition, city dwellers are an important source of labour which pastoralists depend on when lacking adequate domestic labour. Labour is needed in spring during the birthing of sheep and goats, during the goat cashmere combing season and while milking mares and other livestock to make *airag* and traditional dairy products in the summer. However, the pandemic prevented pastoralists from asking city dwellers for temporary help. On one hand, it forced them to entrust their sheep and goats to outside households living in remote pastures and focus efforts on their cattle and horses, which produce sources of dairy products for cash income. Because sheep and goats were mainly used for domestic consumption amongst these households, they will face less damage to their livelihood even

if the herd number is reduced while in the care of an outside household. On the other hand, it may have accelerated the trend that pastoralists who lacked labour gave up full-time pastoralism.

Today, the remaining 'suburban' herder households in Bulgan *soum* have started building permanent houses (*baishin*) and enclosing pasture around their winter camps. In some cases, they own wooden huts at their summer camp, in addition to larger houses of brick or concrete for their winter camp. In sum, we can see that the sedentarisation of pastoralists in suburban pasture is going on in this area. The decrease in income and increase in expenditure during and after the pandemic can account for the decrease in livestock in some remaining households, though there are three households whose livestock numbers had increased in 2023, in comparison with 2007/2008. Mr Davaa's wife pointed out that not a few pastoralists sold livestock to make up for the decrease in income from the sales of dairy products during the pandemic, and that some pastoralists increased their livestock between my research in 2007/2008 and the pandemic.

A case study of Ongon *soum* in Sukhbaatar province: remote pasture

I also carried out field research in Ongon *soum* located in Sukhbaatar province in southeastern Mongolia, using observation and semi-structured interviews in the spring and summer of 1997, the summer of 1998, the summer of 1999 and the summer of 2001. Visits were made to twenty herding camps (*hot ail*) comprising two to five households each and led by an experienced herder with livestock pens for their winter and spring camps. They remembered the socialist era well and told me how they reorganised their pastoralist techniques when the collective farm (*negdel*) in Ongon *soum* was dismantled abruptly. They, as leaders of camps, generally adopted skills used in the socialist era and quickly increased the livestock which they were allotted upon the dissolution of the collective farm. Those who became pastoralists after the collapse of socialism tended to join their camps as apprentices, whilst some made up their own camps with less experienced pastoralists. In general, the latter owned fewer livestock. Therefore, the damage from the *dzud* which started at the end of 1999 was so severe because they could not maintain the minimum number of livestock to live on.

The herder leaders' households were revisited in the summer of 2008. At that time, I visited seventeen out of the original twenty camps. Similarly, I revisited them in the summer of 2023, although several households could not be visited. As two decades had passed since the first visit, some households had been succeeded by their children or grandchildren. The total number of households I visited in 2023 was 24. As to the herder leaders' households, I found that only one household was missing, while several households, especially those

who had no kinship or affinal relationship with the leaders, had moved out of Ongon *soum* to seek suburban pastures.

In the summer of 2023, several changes were observed: only eight households had no mobile phone service, only one multi-family herding camp (*hot ail*) remained and two households had hired labour. Mobile phone coverage had extended since 2008 and households tended to choose pastures with phone coverage for their summer and autumn camps, even if there was none in the winter and spring camps. Also, some households had stopped using their original winter and spring camps located farther from the administrative centre and closer to the Mongolian–Chinese border in the southern part of the soum. This was not only because of mobile phone service, but also the cost of transportation. However, they did not start selling dairy products, because they still took the view in 2023 that dairy products should not be sold but only gifted to relatives and friends. Most of them felt that they were able to get enough cash income by selling meat, because they had much more livestock than pastoralists in the suburban pasture. Moreover, it was still common for seasonal movement to exceed twenty kilometres, though cases of movement over forty kilometres had decreased. Therefore, their pastoralism in 2023 was still that of the remote area.

The change that herding camps (*hot ail*) had almost vanished signified that most households were operating as independent units. Local pastoralists generally recognise that the maximum number of a combined sheep and goat flock is 1,000, after which it becomes necessary to divide into two flocks. Reducing the need for labour can act as a drive to dismantle a herding camp, as a herding camp with a large number of livestock will need to divide them into several flocks and hence need more labour. For example, a wealthy pastoralist named Mr Myagmar, who owned 900 sheep and goats and was awarded the title of national champion pastoralist (*ulsyn avraga malchin*) in the spring of 2023, dismantled his multiple-household herding camp (*hot ail)* during the pandemic. Mr Myagmar himself joined his father-in-law's herding camp in 2001, as his father's camp was about to exceed 1,000.

Local people recognised that one cause of this trend was the Covid-19 pandemic, which made face-to-face communication between people difficult, including working together, selling livestock, buying commodities, etc. Mr Myagmar's wife explained the pandemic situation in the remote pasture as follows: some older people died from Covid-19, pastoralists could not sell their livestock and so had to borrow money from a bank with livestock as collateral, pastoralists' entry to the *soum* centre was restricted, Naadam was not held for two years from the summer of 2020, no feast was held during the Lunar New Year, and pastoralists refrained from adding new households to a herding camp for fear of infection. The last factor had a serious effect – a lack of labour for pastoral-

ists who had a lot of livestock. It also caused hardship for those who had fewer livestock and depended on rich people in the same camp for transportation and some gifts in return for their extra labour. Because of transport challenges and a lack of labour, pastoralists in this area tended to leave large livestock (camels, horses, cattle) at their winter and spring camps. These are located in remote areas where no outside people will visit.

Conclusion

First, we should emphasise that the Covid-19 pandemic was a social disaster for Mongolian pastoral societies. Although pastoralists seldom claimed that the Covid-19 infection was severe during the pandemic, they recognised its damaging impact on pastoralism. The pandemic created a social environment that hindered their collaboration and gatherings, both of which were essential for increasing livestock and selling its products. My case studies in the Bulgan suburban pasture and Ongon remote pasture reveal firstly that, in both areas, older pastoralists tended to relocate to sedentary areas like the provincial and *soum* centres, although this movement halted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Secondly, pastoralists in the suburban pasture often sold all their livestock and herding camp facilities, whereas in the remote pasture, these were typically inherited by their descendants. Thirdly, after the pandemic, pastoralism in the remote pasture started to resemble the suburban area in terms of the size of herding camps, use of mobile phones and utilisation of motor transportation instead of animals. However, considerable differences still exist. Average livestock numbers, dairy product sales, construction of permanent houses and seasonal movements exhibit variation. In the remote pasture, larger animals, excluding racehorses and cows, tend to be left to graze in the farthest winter and spring pastures, while small animals are often entrusted to others in the suburban pasture throughout the year. The labour issue sharpens the distinction between suburban and remote pastures; suburban areas became more focused on dairy production, while remote pastures shifted towards meat production due to labour shortages.

If we make a diachronic comparison in each place, the average number of livestock that existing households owned did not change much; 470 (2007/2008) and 491 (2023) in Bulgan, 1,569 (1997/1998), 1,098 (2008) and 1,681 (2023) in Ongon. The economic difference between the two areas is apparent. Therefore, we can conclude that the dichotomy of suburban and remote pasture is an effective interpretation of Mongolian pastoralism even now, and that the management scale of each pastoral unit did not change even though the number of households that each unit included decreased in the remote pasture of Ongon.

Even before the pandemic began, it was clear that pastoralists could not continue to increase their livestock numbers indefinitely, because increasing grazing pressure on the land would reach the carrying capacity at some point and risk environmental disaster like *dzud*. On the other hand, as Mr Davaa of Bulgan told me just after the *dzud* in 2010 (Ozaki, 2019: 244–245), pastoralists who regarded livestock as assets thought it was unrealistic to reduce the numbers, so they continued, although they felt it could not be sustainable. Judging from the statistics, the total livestock numbers in Mongolia might have already reached some kind of limitation just before the pandemic, while the pandemic as a social disaster discouraged pastoralists from increasing livestock again, regardless of the area. In my case study sites, the pandemic affected the situation in several ways: the fear of infection prevented pastoralists from meeting in person, which affected the organisation of herding camps (*hot ail*), and reduced contacts with sedentary people who could serve as labourers or merchants. It also affected the migration of family members abroad for cash income.

As examples of past resilience from disasters in Mongolia and Japan demonstrate, resilience does not simply mean returning to the pre-disaster situation. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, pastoral societies should and can establish a new equilibrium point for the future sustainability of the pastoralism they aspire to pursue. In this sense, we can acknowledge that the pandemic did not serve as a generator but rather as an accelerator of change, similar to the environmental and social disasters Mongolia has faced in the past.

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❄ *Chapter 3* ❄

Change and Adaptation as a Way of Life: The Case of Qazaq Pastoralists in Western Mongolia

Peter Finke

Introduction

Pastoral households in most parts of the world are confronted with great fluidity in resource endowment and consequent unpredictability of opportunities available to them. This is grounded, first and foremost, in the fact that they live in environments of scarce resources and fluctuating weather conditions, which often pose a threat to the survival of their herds. In the Mongolian context, this is conceptualised by the term *dzud*, or the cognate *jüt* in Qazaq, that describes a variety of natural calamities from winter frosts and snowstorms to summer droughts. In the course of the last two or three decades, *dzud* events have become increasingly frequent, a fact that local herders ascribe to global climate change (Murphy, 2011; Thrift and Ichinkhorloo, 2015; Ahearn, 2017).

In addition, Mongolian pastoralists have – like other post-socialist societies – experienced dramatic socio-political and macro-economic changes with the transformation from a planned to a market-oriented system (Sneath, 2012; Murphy, 2014; Plueckhahn and Bumochir, 2018). Rural households have experienced a series of ups and downs over the last thirty years or so, with the Covid-19 pandemic being the latest and most disturbing event. Finally, when it comes to the western provinces of Mongolia, the out-migration of more than half of the local Qazaq population to Qazaqstan over the last thirty years constitutes yet another challenge to established patterns of sociality and cooperation (Finke, 2023).

To these challenges, pastoralists in Western Mongolia have responded in multiple ways, many of which are an integral part of their socio-economic portfolio to adapt to constantly changing circumstances. On the one hand, flexibility is a key ingredient of the pastoralist lifestyle because ecological conditions demand rapid decision-making by individual households, as in other parts of the world (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson, 1980; Casimir, 1992; Fernández-Giménez, 2002; Upton, 2012). At the same time, short-term strate-

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gies and long-term planning for one's own needs and benefits must be balanced with the expectations of the socio-political environment within which goods are distributed and cooperative activities take place. And, to make things even more complicated, these networks of mutuality are structured by hierarchies of knowledge and power that at times complicate collective action and sustainable usage of natural resources (Finke, 2021).

This chapter will describe the challenges faced by pastoralists in the district of Khovd *soum* in Western Mongolia, and the types of adaptive strategies they utilise to respond to them. Individual households oscillate between a variety of decisions to balance, of maximising versus consolidating herd sizes, going for more or less diversification, increasing versus reducing seasonal mobility, as well as staying put, moving to Qazaqstan or eventually coming back. What pastoralists in the region share, I argue, is that flexibility is not only a matter of choosing between strategic dichotomies, such as variability or regularity in territorial decisions, but equally between different categories, e.g., going for seasonal mobility versus growing potatoes or migrating to the city. Any of these decisions vary and can be combined in multiple ways with one another.

Data for this research has been collected over more than three decades, since the beginning of the transformation process in Mongolia in 1991 at the end of socialism. Most information is based on participant observation and casual conversations with hundreds of households, often repeatedly over the years. These encounters included Qazaq and Uygurs as well as Mongol families, the latter being mainly members of the *Ööld* group. Besides qualitative methodology, I also made use of local statistics and archival material if available (Finke, 2023). In this chapter, case studies will be utilised of families whom I have known for thirty years or more.

The case of Western Mongolia: ecological, demographic and economic parameters

The westernmost part of Mongolia is made up of the three provinces (*aimag*) of Khovd, Uvs and Bayan-Ölgii, and has several characteristics. One is ecology. This is the part of the country with the highest mountains and largest lakes, the northernmost deserts and the greatest variations in temperature, with winters regularly exceeding –30^{0} C and summers the equivalent in the positive (Ündesniy Atlas, 1990: 69ff.). Another is the location at the margin of the state. The capital of Ulaanbaatar is some 1,500 kilometres away, and in socio-political terms the three provinces are considered distinct from the rest of the country due to their demographic configuration, harbouring most of the national minorities (Nyambuu, 1992).

Among them, Qazaqs represent the largest minority group in the country, oscillating around five per cent of the total population (Finke, 2023). This group is also distinct due to the emigration of the majority of its members since the 1990s. When Qazaqstan declared itself an independent state in 1991, it invited all its diasporas worldwide to 'join the native fatherland' (Finke, 1995, 2023; Diener, 2009; Kuscu, 2012). This gives Qazaqs more strategies than their Mongolian neighbours to respond to challenges, as they have the option of leaving. Although not shaped by systematic discrimination, ethnic relations have worsened in recent decades, representing an additional motivation for Qazaqs to leave the country for good (Finke, 2023).

Khovd *soum* is a district within the province of the same name, bordering on neighbouring Bayan-Ölgii *aimag* where the majority of Mongolia's Qazaqs live (Šildebay and Khovdabay, 2000; Zardıkhan and Šildebay, 2012). Within Khovd *soum*, Qazaqs account for around ninety per cent of the local population of roughly 4,000 individuals, complemented by a few dozen each of Mongol and Uygur families. This is still the case today, despite the massive out-migration to Qazaqstan since the early 1990s (Finke, 2023).

In ecological terms, the district is typical of the larger region. Close to the provincial centre, also named Khovd, it is made up of high alpine pastures in the west and lowland desert-steppes towards the east, with some arable land along the delta of the Buyant River (Finke, 2023). Given the local environment, pastoralism has always been the mainstay of the local economy. Many households combine pastoralism with some form of agriculture, mostly vegetables and potatoes, but also melons, either as a supplement or primary activity for trade and domestic consumption. Other businesses are poorly developed. As in Mongolia generally, herders maintain mixed herds of sheep and goats, horses, cattle and some camels, and have returned to a diversified flock composition after the specialisation excesses of socialist planning. Traditionally, yaks accounted for roughly half of the local cattle, a reflection of the mountainous nature of the territory, but have decreased significantly since the *dzud* of the early 2000s. Also, camels have almost disappeared from the scene, while goats have constantly grown in numbers as they provide, in the form of cashmere, the main source of income for rural households, as is true for all pastoral Mongolia (Marin, 2008; Murphy, 2011).

These changes have also affected seasonal cycles, which are complex and fluctuate over the years. Grossly simplified, two distinct patterns exist, where families specialising in small stock spend summer and winter in alpine areas, moving down to the plains in spring and autumn, while those with greater numbers of larger stock stay in the lowlands for three seasons, spending only the warmest time of the year in the mountains. This often creates overlapping forms of mobility and a careful management of seasonal claims (see Figure 6.1).

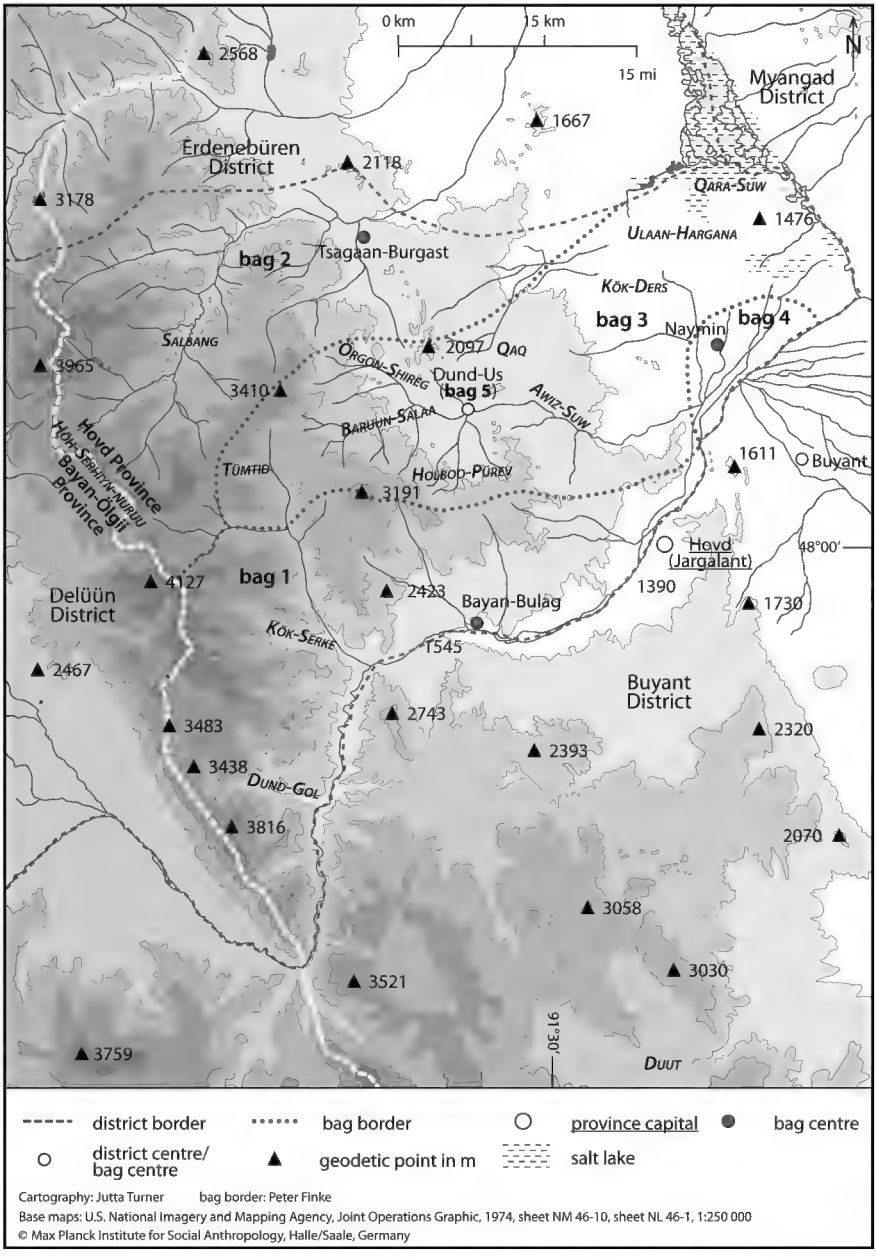

Figure 3.1: Map of Khovd soum in Khovd Province. © Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

During socialist times, the cooperatives set the terms by allowing free movement within the larger district according to fixed seasonal time margins. Today, this is a matter of great dispute and quarrels over pasture rights are frequent (Finke, 2021).

The most significant changes in recent decades, however, concerned modes of trade. With the dissolution of the socialist cooperatives, channels for selling and obtaining goods vanished without any market structures to take over their functions. As everywhere in Mongolia, this caused a deep and lasting crisis, with a gradual recovery setting in sometime during the 2000s. Since then, pastoralists – as well as their sedentary compatriots – have experienced a series of 'busts and booms' (Murphy 2014), fuelled by state revenues from resource extraction and a reduction of transaction costs due to improving infrastructure and marketisation opportunities. Over time, people have learned to deal with the mechanisms of the new economy and its challenges to a certain degree (Finke, 2023).

At the same time, government policies have often been erratic, at least from the perspective of marginal areas in the country, contributing to the impoverishment and indebtedness of many rural households (Sneath, 2012; Murphy, 2018; Plueckhahn and Bumochir, 2018). Qazaqs, in general, fared pretty much like everyone else in the country during socialist times. In Bayan-Ölgii province as well as in neighbouring Khovd *soum,* they formed the overwhelming majority and were granted a certain degree of autonomy. Instruction at school was partly in Qazaq, at least for the first four grades, and there were also newspapers and broadcasting in that language. At the same time, the local and regional administration was tightly controlled from above and did not allow any substantial divergence. What particularly distinguishes the Qazaqs from the dominating Mongolian groups is their Turkic language and their religious affiliation as Sunnite Muslims. While Islam was as suppressed as other religious faiths during the socialist period, it was – and still is – a source of identity and sociality, practically excluding the option of inter-ethnic marriages. Another significant distinction is kinship structures, which in the case of Qazaqs are arranged in a complex system of patrilineally defined clans and lineages. Every individual is integrated in a web of affiliations and obligations that enable mutual cooperation and social positioning (Finke, 2023).

Challenges to pastoral livelihoods

To a certain degree, pastoralism is a livelihood defined by its challenges. It is usually an answer to ecological conditions characterised by scarcity of vegetation, due to low average temperatures, lack of precipitation or both (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson, 1980; Casimir, 1992). This is often correlated with great fluctuations over the years, as well as from one place to another. In addition, in the volatile political surroundings pastoralists have to deal with in many parts

of the world, policies are often hostile to pastoralism (Fratkin, 1997; Galaty, 2013). All this is built into the pastoral economy and its accompanying forms of social organisation, by way of seasonal and spontaneous mobility, flexible access rules to land and water, as well as cooperative strategies of one kind or another (Sneath, 2001; Mearns, 2004; Undargaa, 2017).

The socialist regime aimed at making life for pastoralists somewhat safer and more predictable. In reverse, the transformation to a market-oriented economy reintroduced a lot of uncertainties. On the one hand, the organisational and distributional patterns of the new system inevitably contain elements of insecurity, high transaction costs, and fluctuations of prices and demand (Finke, 2004; Marin, 2008; Murphy, 2014). Also, the government showed little consistency in its attitude towards the rural sectors, except for a general neglect in comparison to the needs of the urban population (Marin, 2008; Sneath, 2012). All this did not create favourable conditions for entrepreneurship and social cooperation.

Apart from the transformation process, a second major challenge specific to post-socialist Mongolia was several natural catastrophes, the *dzud* of the early 2000s and later (Sternberg, 2010; Murphy, 2011; Thrift and Ichinkhorloo, 2015; Ahearn, 2017). Such calamities have always been an ingredient of local pastoralism, but the increase in frequency and severity caused the death of millions of animals and the impoverishment of tens of thousands of households, many of whom migrated to the urban centres to seek other sources of income. This was aggravated by the reported absence of state-organised emergency schemes during the earlier *dzud*, in contrast to what had been the case in socialist times, which contributed to many rural families losing trust in pastoralism as a livelihood in an era of climate change (Murphy, 2014; Finke, 2023).

A third challenge was the migration of Qazaqs in and out of the country, which had deep impacts on livelihoods and social relations. One aspect of this is demographic. Due to the scale of population movements – back and forth – their number has fluctuated greatly over the last decades. But the fact that, to this day, more than half of all Mongolian Qazaqs have left also caused serious ruptures in economic and social respects. At the same time, it allowed those who stayed – as well as Mongolian-speakers in these areas – to expand their business opportunities and land usages (Finke, 2023). But as everyone still around has the option of leaving, this impacts people's time horizons and their inclination towards collective activities. And it also impinges on ethnic relations and, for many of the majority population, calls into question the right of Qazaqs within Mongolia (Diener, 2009; Finke, 2023).

Finally, as the most recent challenge, the Covid-19 pandemic deeply influenced the rural economy in Mongolia. It did so on a very personal level when people from Khovd *soum* – as all over Western Mongolia – were not able

to leave the country to go for trade trips or visit relatives in Qazaqstan. It also affected economic activities: during its height in 2020 to 2022, pastoralists were badly affected by the breakdown of international merchandise routes and border closing (Bayartsogt, 2020). While such a pandemic may not recur, in contrast to natural calamities, it added to the uncertainty pastoral households experience and thus influences the strategies they employ.

Dealing with change; a kaleidoscope of adaptive strategies in Western Mongolia: Maximising or consolidating livestock numbers?

As indicated, many of these challenges are an integral part of pastoral everyday life and, as such, there are strategies available to deal with them. What makes the post-socialist situation different, however, is the scale and suddenness of transformation that caused institutional arrangements to collapse and impeded the development of mutual trust and cooperation (Finke, 2004). The early strategies people adopted were therefore mostly defensive. A prominent one was to maximise livestock numbers to meet the new risks that came along with a market economy. The animals that people were allocated during privatisation from collectively owned herds, in addition to those they had previously been allowed to maintain privately during socialist times, seemed insufficient for the new situation, where ecological disasters or other misfortunes were always possible. It seemed best to increase individual herd sizes as a safety net. Obviously, not everyone was equally successful in this, and households also started from diverse initial points. But overall, the first years saw a great expansion of most families' holdings (Finke, 2004).

Over time, however, fortunes varied according to a number of different factors. One was the original number of animals at the time of privatisation. Small stock may multiply quickly under fortunate circumstances, but it needs a certain threshold to begin with, enough to be additional to the family's own needs for consumption. The availability of labour is a major factor. Without enough sons to handle everyday pastoral management, maintaining a larger herd is impossible, unless additional workers are recruited for herding and haymaking. This is somewhat different for large stock, which is left to graze unattended for most of the year, but very few would exclusively specialise in cattle or horses. Another variable was to balance the demand for pastoral labour with other economic activities, in particular agriculture, which seemed at least as profitable. And, finally, as with any human activity, a lot depended on luck. Some herders, despite being considered diligent in their job, did not make it over the years or experienced severe downturns again and again (Finke, 2023).

Among those successful in maximising herd sizes was a disproportionately high number of local Mongols. This was due to the very specific fact that, during the first wave of emigration in the early 1990s, livestock was cheap, but few Qazaqs ventured to buy in large numbers as most of them were considering leaving Mongolia for good. Tsedensüren and his brother Erdenebaatar were two of these Mongol herders. Having been rather successful during socialist times, they already belonged to the richest segment when I first met them in 1991 and were able to increase herd sizes consistently over the years. Tsedensüren had four teenage sons who soon started to help in managing the herd. In addition, the two brothers had been small stock herders for the collective and therefore owned winter and spring campsites in the mountains, which are better adapted for feeding small stock during the cold season than the lowlands, where most other Mongol families had their settlements. By the late 2010s, the joint herd of the two brothers had reached a total of some 3,000 animals, which made them the richest pastoralists in Khovd *soum*. It was only then that numbers started to decline as age began to take its toll and their sons were more inclined to move to town for other businesses.

A very different case is that of Azat, a Qazaq herder now around sixty. During the early 1990s, he formed one camp with his father while his elder and younger brothers were farming or had moved to town. Azat is considered a skilled herder, but has had bad luck over the years. In particular, his household was badly affected by the *dzud* of the early 2000s when they lost most of their animals in snowstorms. This may be partly explained by the location of his winter-spring camp, in a deep gorge in the district's midlands, which proved poorly adapted to the masses of snow that piled up. He was able to regain decent wealth in animals and, for most of the time, belonged to the local pastoral middle class, helped by his willingness to herd livestock of other households for money. But he perceives his situation as still precarious and worries about how to endow his children with sufficient funds for their future.

Not everyone was equally successful in increasing herd sizes, and some had to give up on pastoralism altogether. Key variables included the availability of the labour force within the household, a set of skills and experiences to deal with changing circumstances, but also a substantial portion of good or bad luck. Most significant, however, was ethnicity. Due to the possibility of leaving the country for good, some Qazaqs also tried to stockpile animals, but – with very few exceptions – did not buy up the herds of those families who migrated. In this way, the Mongols in Khovd *soum* (as well as in the neighbouring provincial capital where livestock numbers quadrupled during the early 1990s) could acquire additional animals in great quantity for very low prices. As a result, today

Mongols form a proportionally very large part of the richest pastoralists in the district (Finke, 2023).

Diversifying

A second trend that set in from early on was the diversification of economic activities. This was in striking contrast to the socialist organisation where everything was about specialisation. During the socialist period, multi-species pastoralists were turned into specialised workers such as farmers, traders or construction workers. Those who remained in the pastoral sector became responsible exclusively for horses or cattle, newborn lambs and kids, mother sheep and goats, or older male small stock on their way to the slaughterhouses in Central Mongolia or Siberia. Following the collapse of the socialist economy, which disrupted supply and demand, extended families sought to engage their members in various activities. Most prominent, in the research area, was the combination of multi-species livestock rearing and farming, which secured better provisioning with goods for subsistence as well as for trade. With time, although still relevant, these patterns were increasingly replaced by strategies that focused on the individual household. Diversification turned into switching. Pastoralists turned into agriculturalists or professional traders, or settled down to engage in wage labour, only to return to livestock a few years later when conditions seemed favourable again (Finke, 2023).

Again, not everyone could equally benefit from diversification and switching. A number of factors apply. One is, again, the availability of the labour force or the size of the kin network. Families with only one or two sons, as is the case for most Mongol households, are unable to combine pastoralism and farming. They also tend to have fewer close relatives settled in the area to exchange goods with. A second factor is the site of seasonal camps. Clearly advantaged in this regard were the former large stock herders for the collective, whose spring and autumn pastures are in close vicinity to the arable fields in the north-eastern corner of the district. Other types of diversification or switching demand substantial resources, e.g. buying a truck to conduct trade or maintaining several households in different parts of the area. And, finally, any such activity requires specific skills. One can, for example, clearly see the difference in harvest yields for experienced farmers and those who treated farming as a supplement (Finke, 2023).

In regard to diversification and switching, there is a similar divide between Mongol and Qazaq families, although, again, with exceptions on either side. Nergüi's was, for many years, the only Mongol family engaged in agriculture. While he had been engaged solely with large stock during socialist times, and

continued in this way for some years in its aftermath, he started to grow potatoes and some vegetables in the early 2000s. At that moment, with seven sons in their teens and early twenties, the family had sufficient labour available to do justice to both herding and farming. Agriculture was, however, always less important and never a major source of income. It was mostly for their own consumption and a little barter with other Mongol families. At the same time, like Azat, fate did not always treat Nergüi well, although he was considered a very skilled herder. The family lost most of their animals during the *dzud* years and has only recently regained a decent level of pastoral wealth. When his sons started to marry and leave the household, beginning in the 2010s, with several of them moving to the capital of Ulaanbaatar, the family finally gave up and quit agriculture.

Not far from Nergüi's winter and spring campsite are those of Saylaw, who belongs to the small group of Uygur families in Khovd province. They have long been more or less integrated into the local Qazaq society, socially as well as culturally. The main difference is their stronger representation among the agriculturalists in the district, an economic activity typically associated with Uygurs. But, since early socialist times, there have also been a few specialised pastoralists among them. Saylaw was, like his father Ibragim, a horse and cattle herder. When I first met him in 1991, he settled together with three younger brothers, one of whom was also in pastoralism, while the others made a living by growing potatoes and vegetables. Saylaw himself has gone through turbulent years. With his sons he had always used the nearby arable fields as a secondary source of income. But after livestock numbers crumbled in 2010, the family turned to potato cultivation as their main activity. A few years later, I met him settling far from his usual campsite, near the provincial capital, where he was taking advantage of the market for dairy products, which he could deliver from there on a daily basis. By 2014, he had moved to town to engage in trade as a full-time job, only to return to a pastoral livelihood again towards the end of the decade. Today, the family is well-off and highly diversified.

In many ways, the diversification of economic activities is a return to traditional patterns that were temporarily suspended by socialist planners who saw specialisation as the gateway to enhancing productivity. But while, during the early years, this was, as with maximisation, a strategy to reduce risk, it turned over time into one of investing in the future generation. Simultaneously, this entailed a shrinking of scope, from extended family arrangements to a focus on changing opportunities within a household's planning. As with other strategies, this worked better for some and less so for others. Labour force and individual skills were again major factors. Another factor was the location of seasonal sites, which allowed easier access to additional sources of income. And,

maybe most importantly, it was a question of willingness to take risks in search of opportunities rather than avoiding them in times of crisis. In this regard, no clear distinctions can be seen according to ethnicity, except for the fact that Qazaqs tended to have an advantage due to the, on average, larger households they form (Finke, 2023).

Seasonal mobility in Khovd *sou*m

A main strategy for pastoralists to deal with risks and opportunities is obviously the scale and frequency of seasonal migration. In this regard, people in Khovd *soum* show great diversity, both from one household to another as well as over the years. Part of this is a consequence of the local ecology, which demands different patterns depending on the dominant species in the herd. As described above, small stock demand an annual cycle difficult to accommodate for those who have inherited seasonal campsites established for cattle, horses or camels during socialist times. But a multitude of other variables come into play. Equally, the willingness to move at all has changed, with more and more households deciding to settle down permanently in the *soum* or *aimag* centre, leaving their animals with a family member or hired herder. They do so, very often, as this seems to offer better chances for their children to make it into higher education schemes (Finke, 2023).

Apart from the mentioned structural differences regarding pastoral decision-making, a number of individual factors come into play. A key role is, yet again, the existing resources, both in terms of livestock and labour force. With a flock of 100 sheep and goats, the benefits of long-term movements do not really match the costs, while dividing herds in case of larger numbers of large and small stock is only doable with sufficient labour to do the herding. Skills are of equal significance and, during summer, when everyone is keen on collecting information about pasture qualities across the district, the assessment of experienced herders is highly appreciated – but not always easy to get (Finke, 2021). But even the most skilled herders balance the costs and benefits of single movements. Frequent and more distant moves promise better forage for their animals, but also higher demands on labour and lesser comfort. This is not to everyone's taste.

Joldas has been a herder throughout his life, like his father and his elder brother. They all follow a typical seasonal cycle for small stockholders. The spring camp is located in the midlands, east of the district centre, in an open plain but hidden by some minor hills to protect from storms. In summer, they move to the mountains, up to an altitude of slightly above 2,000 metres. In most autumns, they go down to the lowlands near the agricultural areas where

they also cut hay. At an altitude of 1,100 metres, this is the lowest point of their annual cycle. For winter, they return to the mountains, close to their summer camp. Joldas is generally considered a skilled and diligent herder but was severely hit by the 2010 *dzud*, losing roughly two-thirds of his then 1,000 animals. In the following years, he moved even further uphill to Dund-Gol, a more or less deserted summer pasture area due to its remoteness. For 2016, the family even decided to stay there for a whole year to fatten their small stock. This proved to be a highly beneficial choice and, by 2018, their livestock numbers were back to previous heights.

Very different was the fate of Idırıs and his family. They had been cattle and horse herders for the collective, with some of his nine sons moving into agriculture while others became state employees, working as teachers and physicians. Idırıs never belonged to the very rich pastoralists but, over the years, accumulated a decent number of cattle, together with his eldest son, Äwes. As is typical for large stock, the family had their combined winter-spring campsite in the lowlands of Ulaan khargana, where bushes and small trees protect against snow, and the high grasses are sufficient fodder for cattle. Horses and camels, at the same time, usually roam freely and play less of a role in the location of seasonal sites. In summer, most of the family settles in the lower mountain areas west of the district centre, at an altitude of some 1,700 metres. Only one of the sons, and in many years none, would migrate further uphill to fatten the household's sheep and goats in the alpine region. This is a cycle they have pursued for decades with very little alteration. It is also one including fewer moves and shorter distances than Joldas. This is considered a disadvantage when the aim is to increase herd sizes, especially of small stock. But it allows one to settle closer to the district centre and the main truck routes, which also helps when selling fermented mare's milk and other commodities during the summer, as they have done for many years.

Seasonal mobility is obviously a prerequisite for a pastoral existence in Western Mongolia, irrespective of ethnicity, social standing or prosperity. Herds will flourish only with access to good grazing, the location of which varies within a year and over time. The demands of the market and the sharp discrepancies in livestock numbers have also caused distinctions in this regard. For poor households, frequent movements over larger distances hardly pay off. At the same time, an increasing number of people would prefer to stop nomadism altogether in favour of a sedentary lifestyle. As with other strategic decisions, the availability of labour in the household plays a salient role, as do skills and other circumstances (e.g., illness of a family member or education plans for children). There is no significant difference between Qazaq and Mongol families, although

the latter tend to be less stable in their annual cycles and more often argue for open access when it comes to access rules for pasture areas (Finke, 2021).

Migration to Qazaqstan

Finally, in the case of Western Mongolia, following the Qazaqstan Government's invitation, to repatriate was another way to adapt in times of difficulty. As noted above, more than half of all Mongolian Qazaqs have left the country, as well as a significant part of the Uyghur minority (Finke, 2022). However, due to higher birth rates and some internal migration from other regions in Mongolia, this has not changed the ethnic composition in Khovd-*soum*, or in Bayan-Ölgii for that matter. Qazaqs are still the clear majority and have even increased as a proportion because many Mongol families left the area again after the last *dzud* and moved back to town (Finke, 2023). Among those Qazaqs still around, ideas on migration vary. Some express a clear preference for staying, considering Mongolia a place of peace, liberty and unspoiled nature, compared to neighbouring Qazaqstan. Others, and presumably the majority, are undecided, to judge from their statements on the matter.

There is a great variety of arguments for and against moving, as there are factors that influence individual decision-making. A key variable is, yet again, available resources. During the first wave, it was mainly the impoverished urban Qazaq population who left, as they saw no future in the crisis-ridden post-socialist Mongolia. Today, it is mostly the poorer segment staying because they have less hope of starting a successful career in Qazaqstan. Another major factor is the number of kin on either side of the border. As of today, everyone has family members in both states, creating an incentive for those in Mongolia to move. In particular, those left behind on their own – usually daughters who are already married – try to push their new families to migrate. Highly relevant these days is also the age of a family's children. People had to learn the hard way that the chances of the future generation are severely threatened if they change the school system halfway through. So, it is better to move either when they are still young, or after all have graduated from high school, which is not an easy task given that most Qazaq families have four or more children of various ages. But then, inevitably, decisions were also based on individual attitudes and the willingness to take risks either way (Finke, 2023).

One family where most members had left Mongolia was that of Jampeys. He had been a horse herder during socialist times, and when I first met him in 1991, he had settled with his younger brother, a veterinarian, and the family of his wife's brother, a farmer. These families were all considered moderately prosperous at that time but subsequently things would gradually turn for the worse.

A critical moment was Jampeys's death in the mid-1990s, which left his minor sons without the time to develop the skills necessary for a successful pastoral career. Starting in the early 2000s, one after the other left, and today only one daughter out of ten siblings still lives in Mongolia, trying to convince her in-laws to move as well. Jampeys's brother and sister left too, with their families, as did most of his first cousins, the last one in early 2024. Most of them have settled in Qazaqstan within a radius of ten to twenty kilometres, also maintaining close contact with other members of the original Khovd community (Finke, 2013).

A very different case is that of Moldabay. He had been herding sheep and goats for the cooperative, but he decided early on to leave for Qazaqstan. Like most other families from Mongolia, they were settled in the northern provinces of Qazaqstan, where the dominant population, and language, is Russian to this day, but where houses and jobs were available. Towards the end of the 1990s, Moldabay changed his mind and returned to Mongolia. He was fortunate enough to rebuild a decent herd, even during the *dzud* years, and today, with several grown-up sons, he has a thriving enterprise, supplemented by some agricultural activities that enable them to invest in the higher education of the next generation. He is nowadays well integrated and has no plans to leave Mongolia again, as long as other Qazaqs still remain.

The option to leave the country in times of hardship – or superior opportunities on the other side – is obviously the greatest difference between Mongols and Qazaqs (as well as Uygurs, to a certain degree). As mentioned, more than half of the latter have done so since the early 1990s, and almost all of those remaining have at least toyed with the idea of doing so. The motives for leaving or staying have changed over the years but were mainly economic in nature. This does not necessarily imply that out-migration was more common among the poor. While during the first wave push factors were clearly at the forefront, in later years it was the superior prospects for a new existence in Qazaqstan which induced many of the prosperous and well-educated families to leave. With time, separation from family and kin became an ever more important factor in people's calculations. The loss of such a large proportion of the ethnic community affected relations with local Mongols and national authorities, by and large worsening the status of Qazaqs and their legitimacy when it comes to claims on land rights or political participation (Finke, 2023).

Conclusion

While pastoralists generally must deal with environmental and political uncertainties, in Western Mongolia, they also faced the sudden rupture of the economic system in the early 1990s and the simultaneous invitation of a neighbouring state

to accept a large part of the local population. This provided people with more challenges and also more options than is the case for pastoralists in other regions. Such challenges are typically differentiated as risk or uncertainty, depending on the ability to predict their probability, and therefore to adopt appropriate strategies (Bollig, 2006). In real life, events such as changes in climate conditions or the Covid-19 pandemic were hard to foresee only a few years ago, and may lead households into a state of precarity when their survival is threatened. This is, of course, particularly severe in a pastoral economy where frosts or droughts not only destroy a given year's harvest but encroach on the very means of production for the future. A herd depleted is no longer a productive asset, in contrast to a piece of arable land after a crop failure.

As I have tried to demonstrate, some of the strategies households in Western Mongolia apply to deal with uncertainty and continuous change are inherent in the customary patterns of a pastoral lifestyle, built into the local social fabric. To this belong all forms of seasonal mobility, the more regular type in average years, but also extraordinary moves into remote mountain areas when circumstances suggest doing so, as in the case of Joldas. Diversification per se is also not a newcomer but a pattern to be found everywhere in the pastoral world (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson, 1980; Fratkin, 1997). The speed and frequency, however, with which people have switched economic activities over the last thirty years or so are remarkable. At the same time, adaptability varies a lot by need, skill and personality, and so does the success of such practices. There is no simple answer on what to do in uncertain circumstances, and the outcome always depends to a certain degree on what others choose to do (Finke, 2023).

One important point is that risk and vulnerability, and the consequent losses in livestock or other assets, are not only unequally distributed, but also involve different degrees of urgency when hitting individual households. There are, clearly definable, thresholds of being affected. Below a certain number of animals, it becomes difficult or even impossible to regain prosperity, making people slip into precarity. The options of settling down to become a farmer or trader are limited as well, depending on family size and societal connections. Out-migration is the most obvious choice in such a situation, although one that is available only for Qazaqs and Uygurs. Indirectly, of course, this also benefits those families who stay, including local Mongols, because it increases the amount of land – pastoral as well as agricultural – for the remaining households. It does, however, put stress on inter-ethnic relations and the legitimacy of Qazaqs in the country, at least in the eyes of many, which is not a promising basis for future cooperation. So far this has not evolved into a serious issue but may well do so in times of crisis, such as a *dzud* or a global pandemic constraining trade opportunities and collaborative attitudes on the ground.

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❄ *Chapter 4* ❄

Women Herders' Changing Role in Mongolian Pastoralism

Troy Sternberg, Bayartogtokh Tserennadmid and Tugsbuyan Bayarbat

Women play an essential part in the pastoral economy, with roles encompassing family, household, herding and management responsibilities (Ahearn, 2018; Walker et al., 2022; ADB, 2022). In literature on pastoralism, the dominant themes of livestock, climate, environmental degradation and economics tend to be considered within the men's sphere; the critical role of women may be neglected or ignored (IUCN, 2008; Onyima, 2019). The glossy covers of international development reports on pastoralism may picture women on horseback, collecting water or posing with children, whilst the hard work and long hours of herding and maintaining a household may pass unobserved. Literature lauds Mongolian women for their essential roles and the key part played by individual women in history (e.g., the Mongol Queens) (Ulambayar and Fernández-Gimenéz, 2013). Yet in the country and across the pastoral sphere, 'women's role in herding and their empowerment ... has been little studied' (Meurs et al., 2022). Recognising women's centrality in pastoralism, this chapter places women herders at the heart of pastoralism in Mongolia (Meurs et al., 2022; Ravera et al., 2022).

Mongolia's women herders are part of an ancient tradition of pastoralism on the Asian steppe. From pre-twentieth-century livelihoods through the Soviet era to today's market economy, women have had a recognised role as herders. Though renowned for their prominence in culture and heritage, international agencies note that women's daily lives face challenges. The 2023 Global Gender Gap Report ranks Mongolia 80th, with concern about women's economic participation and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2023). In 2021, the United Nations identified that progress is needed towards gender equality to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Among the myriad identified challenges pastoralism faces in the country and globally, the continued participation of women is surprisingly neglected (Meurs et al., 2022).

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Women in pastoralism

With much interest in sustainable pastoral livelihoods (Kronenburg et al., 2023; Sternberg et al., 2022), including the attention of international development agencies (UN, ADB, IUCN) and the Pastoralism and Gender Working Group of the 2026 International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, research on the significant role of women in pastoralism and women's inclusion remains limited (IYRP, 2023). Academics repeatedly identify this gap, yet the scarcity of women-centred studies continues (Meurs et al., 2022). Inequality between male and female roles is cross-cultural and is identified in global case studies on pastoralism (Onyima, 2019; IUCN, 2008, Fernández-Gimenéz et al., 2021; Galwab et al., 2024). Understanding and engagement are critical for researchers, communities, governments and stakeholder efforts to address women's concerns and their objectives as pastoralists.

In the mid-twentieth century, pastoral research on the Asian steppe noted females' limited rights and low socio-legal status (Krader, 1955). In twenty-first-century India, female herders were 'perceived as doubly disadvantaged, due to gender inequality and their low social status as pastoralists' (Kohler-Rollefson, 2018: 30). In contemporary pastoralism, men are almost twice as likely as women to own livestock, rural land or a dwelling (ADB, 2022). But not all reading is bleak. On Tibetan pastoralism, Ekvall (1974: 522) writes, 'with regard to women this shows in freedom from restraint, confidence in their own casual directness, considerable license, and in the bravery and resourcefulness ... which imparts to social interaction a distinctive atmosphere in which the womenfolk strike attitudes of equality with the menfolk'. In Mongolia, 'socialism suppressed the differences between men and women. The nomadic lifestyle also precludes an elaborate distinction between male and female gender attributes in everyday life.' (Buyandelgeriyn, 2004: 332) In the twenty-first century, Ravera et al. (2022: 121) identify 'the critical role women play in the future' of Spanish extensive pastoralism. The UN's 2026 International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) highlights the importance of pastoralism to global livelihoods, landscapes, sustainable communities and equality enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The IYRP Working Group on Women and Gender focuses on SDG Goal 5 – Gender Equality in pastoralism (IYRP, 2023). This recognises that the decisions and actions of women are key to resolving the social and environmental challenges pastoralism faces. Mongolia is an enthusiastic supporter of the SDGs, yet they are an aspirational guideline rather than addressing specific social outcomes. Mongolia's approach to mineral extraction reflects the political challenges of inclusive SDG implementation (Sternberg and Ahearn, 2023).

Contemporary scholarship on pastoralism emphasises changing environments, state policy and livestock. In Mongolia, Fernández-Gimenéz et al.

(2024) identify a perceived gendered division between 'inside' and 'outside' work, where men's work spheres encompass outdoor activities while women's tasks are thought of as inside work. Though women are responsible for household management and family chores, field studies demonstrate they are also active 'outside' as herders. In today's rangelands, climate change, degradation, development and conflict are considered as 'wicked problems' that challenge pastoralism yet are difficult to address or resolve (Reid et al., 2021). Within herder families, women's household and management roles are remarkable but often remain unremarked upon. Female herders do not receive the study and attention their significance merits (Fernández-Gimenéz et al., 2021). The chapter attempts to contribute to more female-centred examination of pastoralism in Mongolia. In 2023, interviews with female herders were conducted at two locations in Mongolia to identify the perspectives and motivations of women pastoralists.

Studies on women in Mongolia's post-socialist period

Gender roles in Mongolia have been influenced by the transition to state socialism that included government policies on women's right to work, participate in governance processes, access centralised health care and receive a pension (Janes, 2004; Benwell, 2006). In the post-Soviet period, Randall (1993) examined population demography in Mongolia, considering fertility, health and migration among pastoral nomads. Ykhanbai et al. (2006) addressed the role of women pastoralists and how their 'knowledge and abilities were often overlooked' (p. 184). The authors draw on Social and Gender Analysis (SAGA) to identify the roles, responsibilities and interests of women pastoralists. Their examples and case studies convey how women's skills and work are disregarded in rural communities. According to their work, although women assume much responsibility for household and family work, herding livestock and processing livestock products, they lack a commensurate role in management and decision-making. While pastoralist work is shared, the study highlighted that perceptions of male and female contributions are not aligned. In the same year, Benwell (2006) notes how culture and history shape gender relations and affect changes experienced by pastoral women. These include acknowledging the hardship of herding life, pursuing education and migrating to cities. National regulatory frameworks encourage gender equality, though realisation is weak (Ariunzaya and Munkhmandakh, 2019).

Herding is considered meaningful work, done with a sense of identity and respect in the community (Blades-Barratt, 2024); '...most herding tasks are not gendered, and ... in many tasks women contribute more time than men ... but made few herding decisions alone' (Meurs et al., 2022: 79). The Swiss

Development Corporation (2015) documents female herders' higher workloads (two more hours a day than men), lower participation in community activities and limited control of household assets (Ykhanbai et al., 2006; Voltolini et al., 2015). For women in both urban and rural settings, the constraint of social roles as well as instances of harassment and domestic violence affect their lives in the country (Benwell, 2006; Asia Foundation, 2021; ADB, 2022).

Ahearn (2018) has highlighted the impacts of household splitting on gendered divisions of labour and the experience of women. Since the school enrolment age was lowered from eight years old to six, mothers with young children often relocate to *soum* centres for schooling. This leads to household splitting where men remain in the pasture camps, experiencing 'cold hearths and female absence', while women maintain a separate household in the school-based settlement supported by herding income (Ahearn, 2018: 405). Likewise, an outmigration of herder women is documented; where this occurs, rural marriage declines and the population ages. Amongst the many challenges Mongolian pastoralism faces, a frequent herder lament is that 'when girls go to school, they disappear', reluctant to return (Sandagdorj, 2021: 1).

Interest in women herders has continued through various lenses. Gender and water were studied to document the extra burden on women of water collection and provision (Hawkins and Seager, 2010). In a plaintive paper, women's essentiality as caregivers and keeping household members fed and clothed is stressed whilst their leadership and community-building abilities are neglected. Bamana (2015) highlights female power and gendered meanings through tea practices as a social and cultural process in Mongolia. These restrictions may make women more vulnerable and less empowered (Ulambayar and Fernández-Gimenéz, 2013).

Women's life decisions determine the continuity of family herding. Their choice to participate or leave herding has implications for its future viability. This dynamic has not been addressed directly; the striking research gap highlights the need to understand women's herding actions, motivations and strategies for the future. Women herders make personal decisions that determine livelihood viability: nurturing households, herding animals, producing income and adapting to environmental and social changes when urban lives and education may beckon. Aware of the challenges, how female herders perceive their roles, frame objectives and take action defines the direction of pastoralism.

Methodology

Research for this chapter was conducted to evaluate female herders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. Questions and discussions focused on

their daily lives, including herding, family, work and perceptions on women's role and status in Mongolian society. Two field sites were selected to reflect the diverse pastoralist conditions in the country. The first is Otgon *soum* in Zavkhan *aimag*, which is more than 1,000 kilometres from the capital of Ulaanbaatar. In 2023, Otgon had 636 herding households (population 2,514) (NSO, 2024). It is one of the coldest regions of the country with limited access to markets or recent infrastructure development. The second field site was Kharhorin *soum* in Övörkhangai *aimag*, which is 360 kilometres from Ulaanbaatar on a good, paved road. As the ruins of Chinggis Khan's ancient capital of Karakorum are situated nearby, the region attracts tourists and includes a more urban environment than other rural *soums* in Mongolia. The 1,216 herder households in Kharhorin (population 11,908) have better access to services, internet, markets and the capital. The female/male ratio was ~50% in both districts yet there were three times more senior women than senior men in each location (NSO, 2024). This reflects women's nine-year longer life expectancy in Mongolia (Chimed-Ochir et al., 2022).

Through snowball sampling, eighteen interviews with women were conducted in the two field sites. The group ranged in age from 34 to 63, with three respondents over sixty, six between 50–59, seven aged 40–49 and two women in their thirties. Three no longer had husbands. All were experienced herders, with eight having over thirty years of experience. Seven had herded 20–29 years; three had worked less than twenty years. Their education ranged from three years of schooling to one individual with a university degree from the USSR. The majority (eleven) had completed eighth or tenth grade. Three had some higher education and four had been to school for six years or less. All considered herding to be their long-time livelihood. Interviews were conducted from August to October 2023.

The project team, all authors on this chapter, comprised two postgraduate researchers at the National University of Mongolia and one academic based in the UK. All members had fieldwork experience and knowledge of herding in Mongolia. The group discussed the study direction and developed a set of questions and discussion points. The lead interviewer identified as a Mongolian woman herself, and an effort was made for each session to be private, without men or family present. Women were interviewed in Mongolian in household visits to their *ger* (homes). The aim was for women to speak freely and openly about their lives. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to discuss topics they felt were important. The aim of the research was explained to each respondent, and any questions were addressed. With permission, all interviews were recorded. The transcripts were then transcribed and translated into English to form the basis of this chapter.

Herder women's perceptions of herding

In Mongolia, women's role in pastoralism has been overlooked and undervalued. The intensive nature of work, family and household responsibilities consume a woman's day. During the socialist era, initiatives were introduced for women including access to state education and healthcare in rural areas, the introduction of state pensions for herders and some limited changes to social attitudes. Post-socialist development of the 1990s, including the introduction of the market economy and transformations in communication and technology, has opened new possibilities for women. Pastoralism has evolved as women herd livestock, maintain households and direct children's education whilst using smart phones and social media to manage modern livelihoods. The opening up of new opportunities, developing natural talents and mobility for women has changed their customary roles. Nature and nomadic culture are embedded in their lives.

Women's herding work

For women, herding involves long hours and hard work, from early morning milking to washing clothes after children go to bed. Women spoke clearly about workloads, conveying that women do more work than men. This theme from interviews is supported by development agency reports on Mongolia that document that female herders do an additional two hours a day of chores and tasks (SDC, 2015). This is reflected in respondents' responsibilities that encompass a wide range of household and family chores (cooking, cleaning, caregiving for children and elders), producing marketable goods (milking, preparing dairy products, cashmere combing), often managing household finances and supporting children's education, homework and liaising with teachers. The nature of these tasks is ongoing, time-intensive and without a clear endpoint in the daily schedule.

A composite picture of daily herding life comes from three women (aged 62 and 53, in Zavkhan; aged 43, in Övörkhangai), though routines vary over the course of the season. In the summer, the hard work starts around 6:00 a.m. and continues through the day. The first task is making milk tea, then milking the livestock. Next comes preparing breakfast, making dairy products and continuing chores. Children are fed and readied for the day. Spring birthing season is very busy; then it is time to comb cashmere and cut sheep wool. After moving to summer camp, there is more milking, preparing dairy products, and herding the animals. Corrals are cleaned, buckets are washed, and dried dung for fuel is collected. Then comes preparing for the winter and moving to winter camp. Women take care of livestock from morning to night. In the evening there is teaching children, sewing *deel* (traditional garment) if there is time and energy,

each day trying to get to bed by 10 or 11:00 p.m. Only in the cold weather does the daily routine slow down. The women noted that there is hardly any free time.

A 42-year old herder from Övörkhangai expressed that 'women work inside, men outside. Women do cooking, cleaning, milking animals, feeding.' Yet other chores frequently mentioned included caring for newborn animals, herding livestock, combing goat cashmere, collecting dung for fuel and cutting hay, which is all work that takes place outside the home. In fact, women performed most herding functions whilst also having responsibility for the household. One respondent from Zavkhan, aged fifty, felt women herders had poor status in society because people thought they only did house and kitchen chores, identifying that outsiders did not know they herded, cooked and raised children. In one case, in the summer, her husband took the animals to graze in the mountains for extended periods and she was responsible for all household activity. One woman with fifty years of experience from Zavkhan offered a balance, saying, 'We share. Don't say men's work or women's work. It's all one work.'

One herder stated that there was so much work that there was no time to consider gender positions. Women expressed that the government should help with health care and springtime work, though women's struggles are not addressed. Without expectation for support, a young herder (36, Övörkhangai) felt women should cooperate, work together and help themselves. Men's contribution to household chores was seldom mentioned, with younger women more likely to speak about the value of shared work. The interviewing author summarised that being a herdswoman meant working 24 hours a day, twelve months a year. The work involved in pastoralism is reflected in women's thoughts about their children's lives:

> Daughters study. Not a single person wants to be a herder. Even parents want them to have education. Herder women are going extinct … work is never done for herder women (61, Övörkhangai, 4 decades of experience).

Changes from the socialist era to today

The socialist era (1924–1992) introduced improvements for women in the form of state education and healthcare, rights, pensions and some limited change to social attitudes (Benwell, 2006). In our study, there were differences in experience and perspectives between women who grew up during socialism or in post-socialist times. The older herders had more traditional views that had been shaped during the collective era. Older herders had often started working as teenagers; one had herded for fifty years. With experience shaped by society in the socialist era, they had traditional gender views and limited life options when young. One woman noted that, at that time, women went to the husband's fam-

ily after marriage, and decision-making belonged to the husband and parents. One older herder recalled the socialist times fondly; another elder commented that recently women have more rights.

There was an age-based difference in how gender roles were conceived, with older women more likely to view husbands as the main decision-makers in the family. Men made decisions on livestock, assessed pasture and water quality and when to sell animals. For moving the animals and household, a 48-year-old woman from Övörkhangai stated, 'husband decides, woman prepares all things'. Herders reflected that during socialism the government supported pastoralism but does not now, making herding more difficult now, reflecting the pressures of the market economy. A younger woman from Zavkhan, aged 34 with four children, captured the difference between the two eras in a personal example:

> When my father died, my mother was too modest to make any decisions. That's why it's important for both of us [she and her husband] to be there 50–50 in family life. I decide the family's income and expenses. I decide which animals to sell, which ones to keep … gender equality is not an equal division of labour … it is the right to manage money.

From decades of experience, older woman saw changes in herding over their lifetimes. A recent pensioner from Övörkhangai recognised the choices women now had, saying, 'no women like me will become a herder by their own will. Parents would rather see their children go to university to be educated, then do as they please.' After an adulthood of work, six women emphasised the positive impact of receiving a pension from age fifty, a benefit introduced during socialism. One respondent from Övörkhangai, aged 61, did not think women would be treated equally in society. 'There is no such thing as a government of women where women make decisions. They think that women are inherently inferior to men.'

Herders openly discussed women's roles and rights and shared various views on their household and community responsibilities. The women we interviewed noticed an increase in attention to these issues recently. When asked about women's equality, younger female respondents were more likely to consider their own position and share thoughts on equality between men and women. They also mentioned husbands sharing work and decision-making reasonably. For example, a 47-year-old herder from Övörkhangai explained that work is shared between her and her husband, saying, 'Gender equality is already here. There is no such thing as only "man" or "woman". If he is busy, she does [the work].'

Participants felt women could be successful in business, yet politics was not considered a realm with female access. A lack of female politicians was reported at both sites. Barriers were not mentioned, and they would vote for

women, but there was no candidate to vote for. A herder (43, Övörkhangai) with 700 livestock said, 'having women herder representatives would be great. It's a good idea. Equality is a good thing. It's hard for men to manage without a woman. We go together.'

Interview responses showed that, today, women often control family finances and manage money to meet expenses. It was common for wives and husbands to share or split household income to care for daily life. One fifty-year-old woman from Övörkhangai explained that she controlled the budget and generally everything in the household and was very busy, and her husband did not have a lot of work to do except look after the livestock. Herder women's competence and literacy reflect that boys have more responsibility to look after animals, receive less financial support for education than girls and have a corresponding higher school dropout rate (Kajikhan, 2021). This was noted by a mother of four who asked, 'why do boys quit school to help, and not girls? Who cares about them?'

More recently, herders identified the positive impact of new developments. A 42-year-old herder in Övörkhangai described how mobile phones were very useful to share information and be informed about changes in the weather. She considered Facebook and solar panels essential and used a car to check on her livestock, saying that these innovations were 'incredibly beneficial' as she had 700 livestock and four children to care for. This highlights how the new ways to communicate and engage with family, neighbours and friends through social media were considered a significant improvement in herders' lives. The most experienced woman from Zavkhan (62 years old) stated that 'herders now have what we need compared to the 70s and 80s. Phones, cars, refrigerators, motorcycles, and the internet', which marks a remarkable shift from their early herding days during the socialist era. Also noted was how expensive these possessions and conveniences were.

Women emphasised that the positive developments benefited women's lives. For a 36-year-old herder in Övörkhangai, the best thing was having mobile phones to talk with her children and share information. With a motorcycle, 150 kilometres was not far; she had a washing machine and could transfer money by mobile phone. The ability to communicate enabled women to get advice from the hospital, sell dairy products and arrange their delivery, get weather forecasts, ask neighbours for help finding lost livestock and entertain children. One 55-year-old woman had a more negative view, feeling that Facebook made things worse and that too many vehicles led to more roads and pasture loss.

Mobility is significant factor for herders and women in particular. Once this signified primarily moving with livestock to seasonal camps. Now it also encompasses women relocating to *soum* centres for children to attend school at

age six. Household splitting often involves the mother staying in town during the school year. Younger mothers spoke about choosing between staying with their husbands in the countryside or caring for their children in town. The mother's relocation impacts family life, marital relations and herding work, points clearly identified by Ahearn (2018). If families split, men return to a cold *ger* at night, with one mother's view that 'if we decide to live together, we need to be together' (forty-year-old, Zavkhan). An older herder (55-year-old, Zavkhan) did not support women leaving their husbands to live separately in settlements, relating, 'In Otgon *soum* of Zavkhan *aimag*, many young herder women live in the central settlements of the *aimag* and do not go to their husbands' place to help with the livestock. Very few women stay with their husbands in the winter.' The separation from maintaining two households was identified by respondents as leading to many divorces.

Women's relations with nature

In both field sites nature, customs and spirituality were integral to daily life. A woman from Zavkhan (53 years old) spoke of her beautiful winter camp, how she cleans the area, prays for her family, the river and the surroundings. 'I worship nature every morning with fresh milk. For pasture, family, and for nature to not get frustrated.' Two women from Övörkhangai also spoke of women's role in protecting nomadic culture and how much they liked herding, loved livestock and making beautiful material from animals. Another woman identified women's role in protecting nomadic culture.

Women spoke of their bond with nature, giving thanks for nature's bounty and munificence and recognising the role of spirits and personal beliefs in daily life. In the morning, women would offer milk tea to nature in a traditional ritual outdoors, flicking milk towards the sky in different directions. The daily offering of milk tea is often expressed as an exchange of gifts. Bamana (2015: 206) identifies the exchange as being, 'with nature and earth and with the spirits of the land and water. Every morning, most women in both rural and urban Mongolia offer a tea libation.' This ritual is closely tied to herders' love for the environment and their harmony with it. A woman from Zavkhan explained, 'Nature is mother, worship with fresh milk tea, and ask if I can take [from her]. [It's] Not religion, but love for nature.' This herder follows the lunar calendar, knows the favourable day to cut grasses and moves often to protect the pasture from overgrazing. She notes that a shaman does a fire ritual to protect their lineage. Another, a university graduate herder from Övörkhangai, 36 years old with four children, said that she 'worships the mountain with milk tea. I do this and feel better inside, it's not like a duty. Pray for good weather. There used to be more rain and better pasture, but [now] winter comes sooner.'

In Mongolia *ovoos* (stone cairns) are markers with spiritual and community significance and are often located on high points in the landscape (Sneath, 2010). Their relevance continues as women felt the rituals were good for nature, with some respondents naming local *ovoos*. A 53-year-old learned during the socialist time to worship *ovoos* and pray for nature which cannot be controlled, and to sing songs to baby animals that the mother rejects. Rituals protect livestock from natural disasters and ensure the wellbeing of herders. Women would also participate in local ceremonies and mark events. One woman expressed how integral these rituals and nature were to everyday life. A 42-year-old herder from Övörkhangai explained:

> We worship nature and love it. We perform rituals regularly. [It] shows our respect in everyday life. Parents advise to worship nature, not even disturb a stone. Try to follow this guidance by not treating nature harshly, [one] shouldn't dig up land. If it does not rain we worship the mountain and have a festival, hoping for rain. I find it meaningful.

Women discussed several additional factors that affected their livelihoods. Changing weather conditions have made pastoralism more difficult, with colder winters, longer droughts, less vegetation and more storms cited. For example, a forty-year-old herder from Zavkhan stated, 'As a child, the grass, pasture was beautiful. Now winter is cold, less snow. Summer vegetation does not grow. There is a huge difference.' Mobility has changed, with pasture access more contested, impacting the distance and number of movements. Government attention and support were limited, with older women noting the difference from the socialist era, even though this was decades in the past. Economic pressures were an ongoing concern with fluctuating cashmere prices and the high cost of fodder, petrol and phones mentioned. Poor medical care, low prices for livestock and children's education made moving to the *soum* an option to access better services. Covid-19 had limited impact, as women reported they had meat and milk, so the pandemic was considered an inconvenience rather than a threat.

Conclusion

The women interviewed were open in sharing their life experiences They expressed a bond with the herding lifestyle, nature and livestock. Older herders had often started working as teenagers; one had herded for fifty years. With experience shaped by society in the socialist era, they had traditional gender views and limited life options when young. At that time, men were the decision-makers with women in supportive roles. Younger respondents conveyed the skills to meet the challenges of contemporary herding and the ability to make life decisions, particularly in support of their children. Difficulties were commonly identified

across age groups and centred on the high level of work involved, money, climate and environment, and limited government support. Pastoralism was spoken of as all-consuming. Expectations for what may come in the future were vague.

New opportunities were considered (for example business, moving to town) even if not pursued. Technology and phones were embraced and used for family communication, staying in touch with the community and to know about news and elections. This enabled a means to check prices for animals, fodder, and cashmere, read weather reports, learn about pasture monitoring and ask for help in looking for lost animals. Motorcycles and vehicles, though costly, were important to daily life. They were used for herding livestock and picking up children from school. Media platforms provided connection and exchange for personal and business matters and linked herders to the rest of the country.

Today's open society enables women to choose from many possibilities and livelihoods, including those beyond pastoralism. This may range from herding to living in town, going to university or working in the capital city. Education, especially for girls, was mentioned as the way to make a change, and directed herdswomen's actions and decisions. Mothers aspired for their children to have a better, or perhaps a more stable, life. Careful consideration and effort were given to prepare children's opportunities in life; this influenced efforts at home and how money was spent. This also reflected the extra effort women undertook to make education possible for their children, including selling food or clothing at festivals, establishing bank accounts for education costs and selling livestock to pay school fees.

Differences emerged between the two study sites. Zavkhan was remote and less developed, maintaining more conventional practices like long-distance migration and typical gender roles. Though community and political dynamics were similar, the Kharhorin women raised gender differences, such as that when official recognition and awards were made to herder households they were often given to the man. One noted that only now had herding awards been made in the name of the family, not just the male head of household. Livestock numbers were abundant in both sites, suggesting that herding remained a viable and productive livelihood. Labour was an issue, especially as less family help was available than previously. In Zavkhan, distance and transport were challenging. In Kharhorin, women mentioned the difficulty in getting decent fodder for livestock in extreme winter conditions.

The lack of young women in the countryside was often mentioned. Mothers encouraged, even pushed, their daughters to towns and cities for education. The belief in education as the route to a better life for children was central to women's considerations. This identifies a dramatic demographic shift in rural Mongolia. As young women leave the countryside, rural marriage possibilities

change, potentially affecting the next generation of herder families and intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Women often expressed that, when girls leave the countryside, they do not return. To an outside view, this context and conundrum reads as a significant social transition that affects herding in the country.

The women's thoughts on the future direction of herding conveyed uncertainty. This reflects the evolution from the socialist era through democracy and the market economy to ongoing social changes. Climate change, environmental degradation, mining and economics are often cited as significant challenges to herding. The desire of many rural residents to move to cities was often noted, with some older women also considering relocating. Recognition of the work involved in herding, potential for education and a notion of better opportunities in towns framed conceptions. New essentials, from vehicles to phones and social media access, both improved connections and highlighted differences between rural and urban lives. The interviewees' relative prosperity demonstrated the viability of pastoralism, with women key to the future prospects of herding. Yet, beyond standard perceptions, a lack of herder women, and all that they bring to make pastoralism function, may equally affect its viability in this proud herding nation.

In rural Mongolia, female herders expressed a love of nature, of livestock, of herding, with interest and enthusiasm for their lives and choices made. Herding required hard work and dedication which were rewarded with the bounty and pleasure of nature, working with animals and independence. This was good for children. Participants spoke from the heart to convey an appreciation for customs and the role of nomads in Mongolia's heritage and traditions. The challenges were many, but years, even decades, of experience showed the women were resilient and accomplished pastoralists. The context and opportunities when they were young women had shaped their lives. Whilst daughters may choose education and an urban life, the women were dedicated herders. In this, the chapter recognises and values their lives and choices. At the same time, research made clear the challenges awaiting pastoralism's future and asks, 'will there be a next generation of empowered, persevering female herders in Mongolia?'

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PART II

Wellbeing and Traditional Foods and Medicine

❄ *Chapter 5* ❄

Sealing the Energy: A Report on Food Practices for Nourishment in Western Mongolia

Moe Terao

Introduction: People who felt 'fine' even during Covid-19

In the summer of 2022, two years after the borders were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, I visited a pastoral area in Uvs province of western Mongolia to ask people about the impact of Covid-19 in this area. While there were more than a million cases of infection in Mongolia, most of them occurred in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, where about half of the population is concentrated. In Malchin *soum* (county) in rural Uvs province, about 1,400 kilometres from the capital, most cases of infection were in settled areas, but many residents and herders seemed to have succeeded in protecting themselves from the disease. They told me how they were 'fine' (*sain*), or 'not bad' (*zügeer*, *gaigüi*). Several of my interlocutors emphasised that they did not need to be vaccinated and were suspicious of the vaccines because they were worried that they might be harmful to health. Rumours circulated that vaccination 'causes memory impairment' (*yum martdag boloh*). While social distancing rules were successfully enforced and generally respected in the countryside, even during the major Lunar New Year holiday in early 2020, I was intrigued by herders' perceptions and practices to promote wellbeing: what did they pay attention to feel healthy and secure?

It was noteworthy that, during my interviews, herders and residents of Malchin *soum* said that they tried to be healthy during the pandemic by 'eating well'. Their narratives were often accompanied by a positive evaluation of the correlation between eating and health: for example, 'I ate well, and I could stay healthy.' This was more clearly expressed by a local district doctor (*bagiin emch*) visiting the camp where I was staying, on 5 August 2022. He is a member of my host family's kin group and works as a community doctor as well as a herder. He told me 'Mongolian people eat *khüchtei khool*, so we have been fine.' The Mongolian word '*khüch*' means energy, and '*khool*' means dishes or cuisine. In his words, '*khüchtei khool*' refers to the energetic characteristics of traditional

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food in Mongolian pastoral areas, which consists of meat from livestock such as sheep, goats, cattle or yaks, horses and camels. On busy mornings and afternoons, herders simply quench their thirst with tea and satisfy their hunger with snacks, milk teas or dairy products, but meat is always used for the evening meal. Meat from their own animals is a fundamental part of Mongolian food culture.

Anthropological research focused on the relationship between human health and diet has primarily concerned itself with the relationship between adaptation to local environments and nutritional intake (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1977), as well as the nutritional and immunological effects of indigenous traditional diets using wild plants, animals and fermented cultures to heal humans (e.g. Etkin, 2006). The concept of ethno-nutrition has also contributed to elucidating what effects social and cultural processes have had on nutrition (e.g. Jacob et al., 2021). Meanwhile, research into food practices and traditional foods as alternative medicine has also found both physical health effects and social meaning in them. In addition, anthropological interest in food practices and traditional foods as alternative medicine sees food practices not only as a source of life-sustaining nutrients and physical properties as edible medicines, but also as healing in a broader sense. Researchers focus on how (with whom, where and when) rather than what to eat. This reveals the value of daily eating patterns and customs as a path to wellbeing that people desire and practise (e.g. Chen, 2009).

The latter perspective is useful when considering the experiences of those who say they remained 'fine' by consuming traditional foods in western Mongolia during the pandemic. Mongolian cuisine, which consists of ingredients from their flocks and herds – essential ingredients for the Mongolian people – prepared in a simple straightforward way, should be understood in relation to their cultural beliefs and customs, which are fundamental to their way of life, in other words, to the wellbeing of themselves and their families. The consideration of self-care through eating in Mongolia is also linked to anthropological studies, which have given thought to nurturing connections between the self and others through eating, and to imagining a social and cosmological world (e.g. Carsten, 2004; Janowski and Kerlogue, 2007). Mongolian food culture still encompasses the connection between the environment and people through consuming meat and other livestock products. Cooking and eating are practised with the idea of sharing blessings and happiness (Ruhlmann, 2017).

In this chapter, the food practices of the Bayad ethnic group in western Mongolia evoke the notion of sealing in and condensing the energy and blessings of livestock, as in the ornament of happiness that keeps the flow of energies in the home (cf. Empson, 2017). In this regard, this chapter draws on literature from anthropology to further develop the concept of association between food practices and wellbeing.

Methodology and background

This chapter is based on research conducted in Malchin *soum*, Uvs province. The research carried out after the pandemic mainly took place in July and August 2022 and July 2023. In the summer of 2022, I visited Uvs province for the first time after the pandemic, having lived there for over two years during my doctoral fieldwork. When I met again with the people of Malchin *soum* and Ulaangom city in Uvs province, after the pandemic, the first thing I did was to ask them how they had been for the past two years.

People's first answers were along the lines, 'I didn't get corona (virus). We were fine', or, 'I had corona, but we treated it and got better. We were not bad.' For them, the newly known virus was no longer a threat at the beginning of this research. First, people in rural Mongolia succeeded in keeping physical distance from others. Typically, they emphasised that during the Mongolian Lunar New Year, which had come round three times since the rapid border closure between Mongolia and China in 2020, people exchanged New Year's greetings by phone and video calls. In addition, people actively tried to avoid visiting other people's homes even in their everyday lives. The pandemic involved the closure of markets and retail stores and curfews in Ulaangom, the provincial centre, and other counties in Uvs Province. In Malchin *soum*, people's movement was controlled by setting up stores that were open daily, and shopkeepers made deliveries to herders living in the grasslands.

The second thing they stressed was their fear of adverse reactions to vaccines. Children and adolescents were vaccinated at the schools or in the dormitories they attended. Urban dwellers also received one or two doses of the vaccine. However, with these exceptions, people interviewed expressed negative feelings about vaccination and adverse reactions and said they had not been vaccinated. This may also be the reason why they mentioned that eating well was the main reason they were 'fine' during the pandemic: 'In the early stages of the pandemic, we had no effective treatment or prevention against unknown viruses, so we tried to build up our immunity through diet and sleep.' In Malchin *soum*, some people mentioned that they slaughtered their horse or bought horse meat in response to the pandemic. As will be discussed later, horse meat is thought to warm the body, so it is eaten during the winter months to prevent colds. People adopted such methods in response to the pandemic.

In response to the above results of initial fieldwork in 2022, I conducted semi-structured interviews in July and August 2023, focusing on food practices, with a total of 36 people, ranging from teenage students to elders in their eighties. Twelve of these interviews were done in pasture areas and 24 in settlement areas, but these categories are not necessarily a clear indicator of whether a person is a pastoralist or settled, as people in Mongolia often move back and

forth between nomadic and sedentary ways of life on a diachronic or synchronic basis. In addition, this chapter also uses ethnographic material from my fieldwork in 2014–2017 to illustrate Malchin *soum* people's trust in cuisines with meat.

Even though everyday food practices were part of their positive experience during the pandemic, some people said that the heavy meat diet used to have a more negative connotation: 'too fatty' or 'too strong'. In Mongolia, recently, especially for people in urban areas who have been familiarised with some kinds of 'healthy diet' influenced by more diverse Western, Asian and other food cultures, which include many vegetables and less meat, the word '*khüchtei*' refers to dishes with too much fat. Animal fat, typically the special fat in the tail of Mongolian sheep, used in traditional Mongolian meals, is sometimes avoided. Even in pastoral areas, high meat consumption was sometimes mentioned in daily conversations as a factor that negatively affects people's health compared to other countries, regarding high blood pressure or life expectancy. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, meat-centred diets were positively evaluated in Western rural Mongolia as a factor that gave them strength to fight the unknown virus.

Another aspect of food emphasised by the herders concerned dairy products. The positive impact of fermented foods on the gut environment and immunity attracted interest, particularly in Japan and Asia, in the early days of the pandemic. For example, in Japan, where I live, the idea that fermented foods (such as yoghurt and fermented soybean natto) are effective in boosting immunity and resistance to new viruses has gained credence. As a result, some media sources reported that fermented foods were in short supply. In the case of Mongolia, however, these livestock products are placed in a distinctive context in the sense that, rather than the biological functions of such foods, the emphasis is on a total reliance on food that is organic and in the centre of the livestock–human relationship (Ahearn, 2021; Ruhlmann, 2017; Konagaya, 1991). Much could also be said about the use of dairy products as a health practice. However, in the interests of space, this chapter will focus on meat dishes, which are particularly mentioned as an energetic dish. The impetus for my exploration came from the revaluing of meat in contrast to some Mongolian people's own previous evaluation, namely that fatty meat is not healthy. Then, in the last phase of this research, I examined the concept of '*khüchtei khool*' itself. Through the interviews, it emerged that it may be less a matter of nutrients and immunity and more about the conceptual energy that humans derive from their livestock and meat. To illustrate this, I will return to ethnographic accounts of several events during my stay in Malchin *soum* from 2014 to 2017 for the discussion in this chapter.

Meat in Mongolian traditional food culture

Before the discussion, this section provides an overview of meat consumption and cuisine in Mongolia. In Mongolia, there are basically five livestock species, but in Malchin *soum* there are few camel-owning households and I have no ethnographic data on camel meat consumption, so sheep, goats, cattle and horses will be primarily described. For daily consumption, sheep and goats are mainly slaughtered. Once a sheep or goat is slaughtered, it is consumed part by part in stages and, when it is finished, the next one is slaughtered. Livestock fattened up to autumn on open pastures are slaughtered in large numbers in the early winter, as the outside temperature is cold enough to freeze the meat. This is both for private consumption and for sale. This seasonal stock of meat provides a greater variety of options for the type of species and parts of the meat used in cooking.

In their simple and diverse meat consumption, Mongolians distinguish between 'hot muzzle' livestock meat and 'cold muzzle' livestock meat. Sheep and horses are classified as 'hot muzzles' and are considered to have warming properties due to the low melting point of their fat. Horse meat freezes very slowly, especially in winter, so the consumption of horse meat evokes a special meaning, such as prevention of cold, and a tonic. Goat and cattle meat have a high melting point and cold nature, which makes goat meat a preferred choice for slaughter in the summer. These meats are also suitable for the production of dried meat (*borts*) for preservation, using a natural freeze-drying process. Despite the various options, mutton is at the centre of it all. Sheep are sacrificed for important feasts and rituals like weddings and the Lunar New Year. In the marriage ritual of members of the Bayad ethnic group, various parts of mutton are used. On the morning of the day the bride leaves her parents' house, she is offered meat from the sternum (*övchüü*) to eat as her last meal. Bayad people think that the sternum meat is for women (Erdenetsetseg, 2015: 61). After the 'removing the curtains' (*khöshig tailakh*) ceremony, which is a sign of the consummation of marriage, a whole steamed long loin of sheep (*uuts*), is served and shared with all participants. The bridegroom's parents who host the ritual, also do a ceremony in which a shank of meat is put on the wall of the *ger* to offer it to a supernatural being. Shanks were also offered in traditional Bayad marriage ceremonies because the talus (ankle bone) associated with this meat has symbolic significance in Mongolia, in that it acts as a hinge that connects the foot and leg and coordinates smooth movement (Erdenetsetseg, 2015: 63).

The ways in which the meat is served and eaten are also media through which social or cultural structures are expressed. The scapular meat has to be shared by the master's maternal relatives (cf. Ongoodoi, 1991: 48; Süld-Erdene, 2015: 395), and it was also customary to break the scapula by hand after eating

the meat, with the future divined by the cracks. The bones should be placed on the fire along with a prayer for the prosperity of the home and the herd. It was also said that if the bones were thrown outside the house like other bones, they would lose their property (Surd-Erdene, 2015: 399-401). The atlas is another special part. On the day of slaughter, the meat around the atlas is boiled together with the entrails and served to the person who slaughtered the animal. After the meat has been completely eaten, the atlas is put on the fire with a prayer for the prosperity of the herd (Süld-Erdene, 2015: 473). Concepts based on the dichotomy of hot–cold, male–female, human–nature, hierarchical, etc. are embedded in traditional Mongolian practices around meat. The process of cooking and eating meat has always included meanings beyond sustenance and taste satisfaction for Mongolians.

Cultural nationalism related to wellbeing

Although food choices are diversifying due to urbanisation and globalisation, traditional cuisine (or meat cuisine) continues to be familiar to Mongolians as both daily and ritual food (Kazato, 2020). In socialist and post-socialist nationalism, traditional practices surrounding food are (re)located as evocative representations of Mongolian or herder identity (Tserenpurev et al., 2015). The collectivisation of agriculture and pastoralism was integral to the development of Mongolia as a socialist state. Increased production of meat and dairy products and other livestock products formed an important part of the planned economy, and slogans and propaganda were promulgated to encourage hard work as pastoralists (Linden, 2022; Konagaya et al., 2021; Shirendev et al., 1969). It was during this period that milk and meat production became explicitly linked to (socialist) nationalism in the pastoral industry, which was integrated into the state's planned economy. After the socialist system collapsed, all state-owned livestock was redistributed to individuals. Although the production system lost its strength and could no longer support the ever-increasing urban population, meat and milk in particular, in contrast to other foodstuffs that had to be imported, evoked no small sense of identity and authenticity in the urban people (Thrift, 2014; Inchinkhorloo and Thrift, 2015). For the Mongolian people, meat and milk from animals raised on the natural grassland in the vast steppes is 'pure' and even sacred. Food produced from farm-raised livestock and sterilised is not considered clean. This gastronomic nationalism is further heightened by negative impressions of processed food imported in large quantities, especially from neighbouring China (Thrift, 2014; Byambabaatar and Thrift, 2015). At the same time, ethnographic studies in Inner Mongolia emphasise the relationship

with Han Chinese culture in the transformation and re-creation of food identity (Bille, 2009; Ozaki, 2020; Bao, 2023).

While contemporary issues of food culture related to nation-building, identity or its transformation have been foregrounded concerning traditional foods, the pandemic may once again have led to a re-evaluation of food culture from the perspective of the health of the ecological relationship between plants, animals and humans (Fijn, 2022, 2023; Muhammad and Fijn, 2024). Over the past thirty years, the increase in mass outbreaks of avian influenza with some transmission to humans has focused attention on the potential for symbiosis between humans and various other organisms in a world consisting of zoonotic diseases and multispecies. Covid-19 has made this development more certain (cf. Keck, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, before the development of vaccines and medicines against the new virus, people in many regions and countries focused on immune-boosting or traditional ways of healing. The WHO announced in May 2020 that it would provide support for scientifically proven traditional medicine as a response to Covid-19 (WHO, 2020). Several ethnographic studies, especially by local native anthropologists, promptly reported practices of people coping with the pandemic using local or indigenous knowledge about food, medicinal plants and alternative medicine (e.g. Muhammad, 2020; Sapkota, 2020; Khiyaaroh and Triratnawati, 2021; Sanyal et al., 2022). In Mongolia, the dichotomy between dairy products (*tsagaan idee* or white food) and meat dishes (*ulaan/bor idee*: red or brown food) is based on the yin–yang and five-elements theory, which reconstructs Tibetan Buddhist medicine for the Mongolian environment (Batmunkh and Enkhbat, 2024). These beliefs are the basis for understanding the ecological food cultures including ideal animal–herder relationships, and various modes and meanings of food sharing based on such ideas (Ongoodoi, 1991; Ruhlmann, 2017). The interest of these studies goes beyond simply looking at the direct effects of micro-organisms and nutrients on the body, or reviewing traditional diets as an alternative measure until a vaccine against a new virus is invented and approved.

The WHO defines 'health' as a 'state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO, 1999). Being healthy has been seen as including not only the medical and biological, but also the cultural aspects of healing and wellbeing. The traditional medicine of Mongolia based on the ying–yang dichotomy and the five elements theory is also advanced as a way of conceptualising and practising wellbeing that goes beyond issues of nutritional intake (Batmunkh and Enkhbat, 2024; Wallace, 2012). Daily care and healing and the adjustment of the body's hot/cold balance are found in Mongolia and other Asian societies. In addition, the ritual consumption of parts of meat or bones can be representations of the wellbeing of

the household or the kin groups. The fostering of social bonds through feasts or sharing food, as described in anthropological classics, is also found in Mongolia (Ruhlmann, 2017). It also embodies 'relatedness.'

Relatedness is fostered between relatives and friends through the meat of livestock provided by pastoralists to livestock-less urban dwellers, echoing the symbolisation of meat, with bones representing patrilineal lineage and meat representing maternal links (Fox, 2021; cf. Carsten, 2004). In the context of this linkage between traditional food and wellbeing, it is probably significant that meat-eating during the pandemic was not so much a specific medical practice in times of illness for people living in rural Mongolia but a daily activity practised in continuity with everyday routines, corresponding to the ecology and ideal world of Mongolian herders' societies. This chapter therefore seeks to clarify how the relationship between daily food and 'being well' in normal times is understood in the rural community in Western Mongolia.

Broth nourishment

In the statement that I often heard during research, 'Mongolian people eat *khüchtei khool*, so we have been fine', multiple understandings of the concept of '*khüch*' need to be considered. It refers to the quality of food in Mongolia, where meat is the main food of choice, compared to Western or Japanese societies, where the damage caused by the spread of the new virus in areas where people usually eat a '*khöngön*' (light) diet has been severe. In some cases, especially in urban areas, the word '*khüchtei*' was taken to mean too fatty or heavy, and the high amount of animal fat consumed was seen as a negative effect. These meals are not good for everyone, and in some cases it is better not to eat them due to age, illness, etc. But for many Mongolians living in the countryside, livestock meat and fat is good and full of energy. The doctor cited above clearly explained that the word refers to the energy of livestock meat. This energy or fat in meat would be referred to by Ruhlmann as nourishment (Ruhlmann, 2019: 43). For the Mongolian people, the source of nourishment is meat and bones, fat, and the broth extracted from them. This nourishment is also referred to as '*shim*' in Mongolia.

For everyday meals, different meat cuts can be cooked for different purposes. However, after they slaughter a livestock animal, they eat it bit by bit until they run out of meat, except after multi-slaughtering in the winter, so they do not always get the meat cut that suits their purpose, and often the meat is simply referred to as meat (*makh*). Rather, what they distinguish and care about is the way they cook, whether with or without soup or well-boiled to extract broth. Broth is called '*shöl*' (or '*shüüs*' in some literatures). During the cooking, the cook

pays attention to the extraction of the broth (*shöl gargah*). For example, when making soup with noodles, the meat has to be boiled long enough to make the broth before the noodles are added. Broth is also seen as a source of health or goodness. Throughout the winter, people eat the meat slaughtered in bulk little by little. When the Mongolian Lunar New Year passes and spring arrives, the meat will just run out and they will joyfully slaughter their first sheep. People in pastoral areas look forward to this event with expressions such as '*shine shöl gargakh*' (make brand new soup) or '*Khavaryn shine shöl uukh*' (drink brand new soup in spring). It is believed that sharing the broth of the first slaughtered animal at the beginning of spring will lead to a year of good health.

The '*bitüü*' dishes as the ultimate nourishment

The ultimate healthy food, which represents the most concentrated of these nutrients in Mongolian meat, is referred to as '*bitüü shöl*' (sealed soup, cf. 'closed soup' in Ruhlmann, 2019). During my research in 2023, a woman in her forties leading a semi-pastoral, semi-sedentary lifestyle, told me that 'the most *khüchtei* meal is *bitüü shöl*'. The sealed soup consists of the basic ingredients of Mongolian meals: meat, salt and flour. A little garlic and sometimes dried fermented yoghurt curd, *aaruul,* are added. The most characteristic cooking method is to place some of each ingredient in the bowl for each eater, cover the bowl with a lid of wheat dough and steam it. The cook I observed explained that closing the bowl allows the nutrients from the meat to be concentrated in the bowl without escaping, and that *khüch*, or energy, refers to this nourishment (*shim*).

Ruhlmann's analysis of *bitüü khool* (sealed food) highlights two key properties. First, it retains nutrients through the 'closing' of the filling. This concept extends to the dietary practices of pregnant and postpartum women, who adjust their consumption of *bitüü khool* based on the perceived 'openness' or 'closedness' of their bodies. Second, *bitüü khool* aligns with Mongolian rituals of closing a year, as seen in the consumption of dumplings on New Year's Eve, known as '*bitüünii ödör*' (closing day) (Ruhlmann, 2019: 146–148, 230). This view of open and closed space is also a way of perceiving the world as dichotomised in this way, but I would like to turn to the very meaning of closing space and filling it with energy. This is because the *bitüü khool* is regarded as the densest meal in which the energy of the ingredients is condensed by sealing the vessel, thus presenting us with the perspective of the condensation of nourishment, the inner fullness of the body.

In a bowl covered with dough, the nutrients extracted from meat and other ingredients are condensed and do not leak out in the form of steam or vapour. The rural people of Western Mongolia place importance on the soup being

hermetically sealed, as they believe that the nutrients from the meat condensed in the bowl are taken straight into the body. In Ruhlmann's description, it was important that the *bitüü shöl* eaten by pregnant women be made of lean meat; the *bitüü shöl* in Malchin *soum* may contain fat, garlic and *aaruul*, and these are aimed at improving health. Most importantly, however, it is the act of closing the lid that locks the ingredients of these contents into the vessels. In addition, the process of making the *bitüü shöl* itself has a cohesive quality that fosters and 'seals' an interest in working on the health of the family.

One day during my fieldwork in the centre of the *soum* in November 2015, I observed how this dish is integral to people's daily lives and associated with health. In a family with five daughters, the eldest daughter, MS, showed signs of illness that winter and asked her mother to make *bitüü shöl* for her, as she was about to catch a cold, and her mother agreed. The girls took a keen interest in this particular evening meal, which they did not usually eat, and observed their mother's cooking, checking with each other how it was to be made. The pieces of mutton, chopped garlic, onions, salt, and *aaruul* were prepared. After putting them into bowls for the number of people, they were covered with wheat dough and steamed in a pot (Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.1: Ingredients put in bowls to make bitüü shul. Photo by the author.

Figure 5.2: Bowls placed on a steamer under the watchful eye of a family member. Photo by the author.

The eldest daughter, who had complained of illness at the time, had already graduated from a nine-year school in the *soum* and was attending high school while living with relatives in Ulaangom, the capital of Uvs province. She was on holiday during the winter preparation season. As if to make up for her own absence during term time, the intelligent and responsible daughter was busy with household chores on her return, preparing morning tea and evening meals for her mother and looking after her younger sisters. While in many other households children take over the household chores in this way, MS was particularly good at it and it was noticeable that things were running smoothly for her family while she was at home. She and her family had lost their father the previous year, so they were struggling to cope with their studies and life during their bereavement and grief.

Consequently, her complaining of illness in such a situation made me realise that this girl, who is usually the one who cares for her family, was seeking care from her family and her mother at this time. Their house is a concrete-block settlement house with a living and dining space surrounding the hearth, without partitions. In November, when the maximum temperature is below freezing, the hearth heats not only the pots and pans, but also the entire room. As their mother began to make the *bitüü shöl*, an intimate atmosphere began to fill the domestic space around the hearth, as if steam already filled the pot and

the vessel was filled with broth. Thus, nourishment, or the link between food and healing and care, should be understood to extend to people's interactions throughout the whole process from preparation to eating.

Sealing the energy

There are examples of similar sealed cuisines being used to improve health, not just in the sense of nourishment, but also in terms of heat and energy transfer to bodies, such as *huushuur*. *Huushuur* is the name of a fried dumpling, also popular as a street snack. Especially during the Naadam summer festival, people can be seen selling 'festival *huushuur*' at festival venues or making it at home. When looking at *huushuur* as a sealed food, it can be noted that there is a custom in Uvs to use it as a kind of bosom hearth or small warmer for the body. In Uvs, when people make *huushuur*, they put the freshly fried *huushuur* in a pot with a lid for a while to let some of the heat escape. After it cools down enough to be held in the hand, they hold the pots between their palms or put them on their bare feet to transfer the heat to their bodies to improve circulation or to treat a painful area.

Also included in *bitüü khool* is *horhog*. This is a dish that uses the meat of a whole sheep or entire goat and is prepared for outdoor activities when guests are visiting or on holiday. It is usually cooked in a sealable tin can over a long period of time over the embers of an outdoor fire, but may also be cooked indoors in a hearth and pan. A characteristic cooking method of *horhog* that is common to both is to place several hot baking stones inside the can or pot in which the food is cooked. Cut meat, potatoes or other vegetables and salt are put in the pot, baking stones which have been heated over an open fire for a long time are added, and the heat generated by the stones cooks the meat and vegetables to make them tender. During cooking, care is taken to ensure that the lid of the tin or pot is tightly closed so as not to leak the heat from the baking stones. When the heating is finished, the stones are removed and passed to the people around the pot of meat. They are encouraged to hold the stones in their hands and touch them to their cheeks to take the heat into their bodies.

Customs for preparing and eating *huushuur* and *horhog* provide an example of the link between *bitüü khool* and health in Mongolia, in addition to the fact that the broth is concentrated. When a container or dough is sealed, the heat stays inside and cannot escape. Sealing can also be seen as a way of keeping in the energy that flows around. Sealing off flowing energy generally appears to be of ideational importance to people in Mongolian pastoral areas. To illustrate this more clearly, some relevant practices found in Uvs are given below as another example.

Sealing the Energy

One is the practice of the people mainly living in Malchin *soum* with regard to distillation of spirits from milk (*shimiin arkhi*) in summer. People do not milk horses in this area and instead they rely on goats and cows during the summer. They brew the milk into a fermented substance which is then used for making other dairy products, principally *shimiin arkhi* (distilled fermented yoghurt). When distilling, a cylindrical distiller is placed over a pot filled with boiling brew, to capture the steam. If the top of the distiller is covered with a pot of cold water, the vapour is cooled and becomes distillate, which accumulates in a container hung inside. The distillation is mainly carried out by the women, who are careful to keep the vapour from escaping in order to collect enough distillate. The space between the distiller and the lid is wrapped with a band to prevent the vapour from leaking out through the gap. In addition, women perform practices that represent this hermetic sealing in a notional way. They close the *ger* door for a short time before they place the pot on the furnace, set up the distiller and wrap the band around it. One elderly woman told us that the reason for closing the door is to keep the *arkhyn khüch* (energy of the spirit) in. The act of closing the *ger* door and the expression '*arkhyn khüch*' tell us their desire not only for nourishment in the real sense, but also for a fullness of energy in the conceptual sense (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: The ger door is closed until the distiller is in place and the strip is wound around it. Photo by the author.

Similar practices can be found throughout pastoral areas when looking at the link between sealing off space and filling it with energy. In particular, the

people of Bayad, mainly in Malchin *soum*, close the doors of their *ger* during marriage ceremonies, not only to separate the inside from the outside, but also to encourage the permeation of the blessings that take place in the *ger*. In the ritual of '*ger bürekh*', which means preparing the bridegroom's new *ger*, the birth of the new household is represented by making the first fire in the hearth of the new *ger*, using fire from the father's *ger*, symbolising succession. During this rite, *geriin yorool* (ritual prayer for the *ger*) is sung beside the hearth to bless the birth of the brand-new household.

The door is usually left open during the ritual but, before this prayer is recited, someone calls out for the door to be closed. If someone unexpectedly enters, the elders who sit in the upper seats, far from the *ger* door, urge the youths who sit near the doorway and relentlessly remind them to close it. The reason for this practice, they explain, is to 'allow the prayers to permeate'. Preventing the chanting of the celebrations from leaking out and allowing the power of the words to permeate the *ger* may be seen as analogous to the relationship between the body and the *bitüü shöl*: filling the inside with good energy and preventing it from leaking out is metaphorically expressed and prayed for through the act of sealing.

Conclusion: The meaning of being '*bitüü*' in the open-air living space

Sealed foods in Mongolian cuisine extend beyond nutritional value to encompass concepts of health, energy transfer and cultural significance. For example, *buuz* (steamed dumplings), *huushuur* (fried dumplings) and *horhog* (pot roast meat) are held after cooking to absorb their warmth. In this light, sealing is not only a part of the symbolic dichotomy between inside and outside space in the pastoral areas of western Mongolia, but should also be understood as a technique that people practice in their daily lives to experience wellbeing and nourishment. Actions such as closing the lid of a pot or a distiller, performed on various scales, are ways of capturing good energy and bringing it into the body without letting it escape.

In analogy with the effect that the act of closing the door of the *ger* is supposed to have on the space inside it, it can be understood that this condensation of energy has an important meaning, not just in terms of enhanced nourishment, but also in an ideological and cultural sense. The energy is then made available to the body in the form of broth, heat and liquor, which is condensed by closing the lid of the container. In Mongolia's pastoral regions, the cultural significance of closing space and allowing energy to stand still and permeate is also connected to the idea of keeping people, things and supernatural energy in flux (Empson, 2011). These practices reflect a broader cultural belief in sealing

energy within spaces, as seen in the distillation of milk spirits, and wedding ceremonies where doors are closed to contain blessings. The concept of *bitüü* thus embodies a holistic approach to nourishment, combining physical sustenance with the preservation and transfer of energy, deeply rooted in Mongolian pastoral traditions.

Looking back on the pandemic, people downplayed the impact of the virus on their health, citing traditional diets as a contributing factor. This is based on a reliance on a diet of meat, fat and broth. In everyday lives, they practice healing through food by varying this simple combination. Although the ingredients are the same, the way they are prepared and the connotations involved in the cooking process are different, and the dish is accepted to create a space and effect of healing, where sealing is a key device for producing this effect. In the Mongolian pastoral area, where movement is the norm and things are not fixed, we can locate the fact that the containment of supernatural energy has an ideational centrality.

In this chapter, the question of how Mongolian people think about wellbeing, which emerged in research on the post-pandemic situation in the pastoral areas of Western Mongolia, has been clarified through food practices. The ideological act of sealing energy explored in this context is oriented towards capturing, filling and sharing the good energy that flows through the nourishment of the steppe and the environment, which can be found in various other practices as well as food practices (Empson, 2011; Ruhlmann, 2019). Although this chapter has only been able to draw inferences through analogies with the *ger*, there is scope to take a broader view and continue to explore this belief, which can be found repeatedly in the lived world in pastoralist areas.

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❄ *Chapter 6* ❄

How Production of *Airag* (Fermented Mare's Milk) is Changing in Mongolian Nomadic Pastoralism

Yuki Morinaga and Batbuyan Batjav

Introduction

The production of *airag* – fermented horse milk – continues to adapt to pastoral changes in Mongolia. The drink, *airag* in Mongolia, *kumis/koumiss* in Turkish and *chege* in Chinese, has been widely consumed by the herders of Eurasia since ancient times (Kamo, 1973; Kim, 1997; Yorulmaz and Baran, 2022). Analysis of microbes in ceramics has revealed that mare's milk was processed by the Botai people in Kazakhstan over 5,500 years ago (Outram et al., 2009). *Airag* was first described by Herodotus in his *Histories* (fifth century BCE). Compared to other milk, horse milk is high in lactose and low in casein protein and fat (Claeys, 2014). This enables fermentation yet limits processing into butter or cheese. With limited methods of preserving horse milk, fermentation into *airag* is effective and reduces lactose intolerance (Guo et al., 2019). The taste is light, sour, slightly effervescent, with a slight alcohol content up to a few per cent, and varies from one maker and region to another.

While milk is central to pastoralism and has a vibrant role in everyday life on the steppe (Ahearn, 2021), factors that affect production today reflect socio-economic transitions in herding and the country (Bat-Oyun et al., 2015). These include changes in family composition, labour, financial forces and traditional practices. Horses are now often raised for racing, and foreign breeds have been introduced for faster horses. A change in the perception of *airag*'s taste, and increased settlement in towns and cities, have seen the rise of beer or soft drinks as an alternative drink amongst younger residents. Concurrently, climate change, natural disasters, migration patterns and pasture quality impact milking and *airag*. Through all this, the shift to a more settled and urban population means that finding experienced people for the labour-intensive work of producing *airag* is a challenge. Yet the drink is considered good for health and continues to play a role in pastoral life and celebrations (Tsuchiya et al., 2020; Ahearn, 2021).

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Long noted for claimed health benefits, including reducing blood pressure and cholesterol levels, parasitic disease treatment, antioxidant effects, improving sleep and boosting the immune system (XiLin et al., 2025), the importance of *airag* and horse milk in Mongolian beliefs and customs was demonstrated in the Covid-19 pandemic. Citizens, politicians and health officials spoke of drinking *airag* for personal health and strength (MoH, 2020). In interviews herders encouraged drinking milk products to protect from Covid-19 (Sternberg et al., 2021). As a natural drink *airag* had long been considered protective against illness and was applied as a remedy for the mysterious new disease (Endo et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2024). As a probiotic fermented food, the efficacy of *airag* against viral infections has been explored in clinical investigations (Choi et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2024). Contemporary consideration of the benefits of fermentation and how 'humans and microbial cultures are fundamentally intertwined' has drawn attention to Mongolia, the Alps and similar locales (Hendy et al., 2021). In addition to boosting human immune systems, the therapeutic impact can include anti-carcinogenic/anti-oxidative/anti-bacterial properties as well as nutritional benefits (Afzaal et al., 2021).

During Covid-19, many claims were made about the health and preventative benefits of drinking *airag*, particularly among herders in the countryside. The Ministry of Health distributed information and circulated posters on social media, TV and radio interviews recommending traditional methods of immune protection during Covid-19 (MoH, 2020). For example, our research indicated that a poster issued by the Mongolian National Centre for Cultural Heritage was part of this effort. The series, titled 'How to Prevent Infection from Covid-19' highlighted 'Traditional Methods to Protect Immunity', citing the benefits of *airag*. It indicated that a type of bacteria found in *airag* can help support immunity.

Modalities of *airag* production

Previous research based on a national survey by Bat-Oyun et al. (2015) revealed that *airag* was produced predominantly in central Mongolia, particularly the 'forest steppe' which is a transitional ecosystem – a mosaic landscape of forest and grass land or 'steppe' that extends westward from the capital Ulaanbaatar. In the eastern steppe region people are not actively engaged in *airag* production despite high numbers of horses, while the southern Gobi region produces *airag* despite a low number of horses. These findings suggest that *airag* production is influenced not only by natural environmental factors but also by local social and cultural preferences. These include practices of horse breeding, rituals and preference for horse racing over milking. Herders express preferences in their

diet while working outside, in dry and cold harsh weather (Bat-Oyun et al., 2015). During the socialist period, management of horses and production of *airag* were state controlled.

The author previously investigated *airag* production in Mogod *soum* (district) of Bulgan *aimag* (province), a famous production area, in the summer of 2013 with Mr N. and his wife U. (Morinaga, 2022). The process of making *airag* began on 25 June, the dog days of late June, when the spring-born foals are weaned. The start date may vary depending on the growth of both the grass and the foals. On 16 June, goat yogurt, produced from milk collected daily over ten days and concentrated, was prepared as an *airag* starter. On 25 June this was placed in a wooden vat. When the horse milk was put into the vat for the first time, relatives and neighbours gathered to help, drinking juice and alcohol and singing songs. 'When everyone is having fun, the horse milk ferments better', say local herders. This relates to the idea that classical music played during wine making improves the quality of the wine, but the lively music-making in the *ger* seemed to have more effect. Later, when the amount of *airag* had increased, the containers were changed to one of two types. First is the traditional *khökhüür* (see Figure 6.1), made from cowskin leather and registered at UNESCO as 'world intangible heritage'.

Figure 6.1: Herder stirring mare's milk in a khökhüür, a container made of cow hide. Photo by the author (Batbuyan Batjav).

The second and more common approach is to use plastic barrels. After the first day, the remaining *airag* from the previous day was used as a starter. The horse milk, collected several times during the day (see Figure 6.2), was cooled and put into containers in batches and stirred by hand for 1.5 to three hours, utilising a special wooden stirring stick. The next morning it was ready and was tasted and adjusted. Adjustments were made by changing the temperature control (container placement, cloth cover and temperature inside the *ger*), stirring time, and the amount of horse milk fed into the starter. The taste was quite unstable from day to day, so adjusting every morning was an important task.

Figure 6.2: A unique method of milking the mare by letting the foal snuggle up to the mare. Photo by the author (Batbuyan Batjav).

Horses are sublime to nomads. There is a Mongolian saying, 'It is foolish to be without a horse'. Mongolian customs, history, culture, festivals and music all revel in praise of the horse. In this light, the history of Mongolian nomadic civilisation is as a 'horse culture' (Saruulbuyan, 2000). Horses are useful animals in many ways and a source of great cultural values and prestige. However, as settlement increases, herding becomes more difficult and livestock products of equine origin are less likely to be obtained. In this sense, *airag* can be seen as a symbol of nomadism. In addition to milk, the growth of horseracing has been a strong motivator for raising horses featured in competitions across the country. This affects milking patterns, as herders across several regions want the

mares' milk to be consumed by foals in order to strengthen them, rather than for milking (Bat-Oyun et al., 2015). In regions where status is linked to racing this has led to crossbreeding as horses have been imported for speed.

Based on interviews with herders, this chapter examines perceptions of *airag* and how its production has changed during the transition from the socialist era to the post-democratisation era and then during Covid-19. Taking two *soums* that present differing environments and development levels, the investigation places *airag* in contemporary society and evaluates its role during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

A series of interviews were conducted with pastoralists in two *airag*-producing districts. The interviews were designed to identify herders' perceptions about the changes in *airag* production and consumption. The questions focused on aspects such as the horses, milking and fermenting method, reasons for drinking and the effect of Covid-19 on *airag* culture. The first research site in Kharhorin *soum* represented the forest steppe of Övörkhangai *aimag*. The second, Adaatsag *soum* in Dundgovi *aimag*, was in the desert steppe. Kharkhorin *soum* is located closer to markets and a paved road to the capital. Adaatsag *soum* is more rural and well-suited for breeding horses in steppe ecological conditions. Both *soums* were active in producing *airag* according to a national survey in 2012 (Bat-Oyun et al., 2015).

Field work was carried out by co-author Dr Batbuyan Batjav, the former director of the Geographical Institute of Mongolia. Research was conducted at the end of the mares' milking season (late August/early September 2023). In total, he interviewed 27 households through random selection and a snowballing process in designated districts. Fourteen households in Kharhorin were surveyed over five days (1–6 September 2023) and thirteen households in Adaatsag over five days (8–13 September 2023). The aim of the questions and research was explained to each respondent and any questions addressed. With permission, all interviews were recorded. The transcripts were then translated and transcribed into English from Mongolian to form the basis of this chapter. Support for the research came from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science No. 20H01391 and No. 23H00722.

Findings

Several key themes emerged from the research beyond the perceived beneficial health properties shared by the communities. Rather than one story, an interplay

between decision-making, environment and tradition affects action and practices. This varied from a revival in using the customary container (the *khökhüür*) and *airag*'s role as a key feature of cultural heritage, to horse numbers and breeds. Pasture quality, movement and migration and generational change emerged as themes. The health-giving properties remained important, particularly in relation to Covid-19, whilst adequate labour had become a challenge for the time-consuming production. The properties of *airag* were unchanged; it saw a peak of interest during the pandemic and a tailing-off in consumption amongst younger residents. Stability in production and transitions in practices maintained *airag*'s vibrancy in changing social and economic conditions.

Changes in airag *production*

Most striking was the effect of labour shortages. Respondents did not change methods of production but reduced the amount of *airag* made. Lack of workers in the household led to a reduction in the number of mares to be milked, the number of milkings per day, duration of each milking and length of the milking season. Mongolia's own traditional milking methods are hard work, but herders reflected that there has been no mechanisation of milking as seen in other countries (Ozaki, 2018). The labour issue reflects changing family and socio-economic factors, as herders explain that children are now attending school for longer periods and often living in the *soum* centre. This sees children commonly settling in towns or migrating to the capital. For example, one of the herders we interviewed explained, 'As the children grew up, I stopped training horses for racing. It is difficult to find children who could be riders for horses' (HH11). Thus, customary labour patterns, where children follow parents into herding, have changed. Economic pressures, such as paying for education, vehicles, technology and migration, focus attention on larger herd sizes. Herders concentrate on meat and cashmere production as these bring more income than selling milk. These factors are reflected throughout the findings, as cost/benefit considerations influence family decisions (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1. Summary of herding dynamics in Kharhorin and Adaatsag.

2023	Kharhorin	Adaatsag
Households interviewed	14	13
Herder age (average)	52	44
Horses (average)	81	120
Mares	23	27
Mares milked	12	13
Racehorses	Yes	Yes

2023	Kharhorin	Adaatsag
Milking Season	June to October	August to October
Times per day	5~6	5~6
Litres per day	to 80	to 60
Type of Container		
Khökhüür	3	6
Plastic	5	5
Both	6	2
Fermentation		
Stir – by hand, daily	3,000–6,000	3,000–6,000
Stir – hours	1.5 to 2	1.5 to 2
Stir – electric motor	few	few
Yeast		
Source	Market, neighbour	Neighbour
Commercial	No	No
Pasture condition		
Quality varies yearly	Yes	Yes
Climate change	Yes	Yes
Household Mobility		
Times per year	4~5	4~7
Distance	local	local
Labour		
Workers	Not enough	Not enough
Children	At school, in city	At school, in city
Covid-19	No impact	No impact

An interesting return to tradition was found in the container used for fermentation of *airag* at both sites. New and old containers for fermentation coexist. The customary *khökhüür*, the leather cowskin bag, is often replaced by blue plastic barrels that can hold from 40 to 200 litres. They are durable and easy to transport and suitable for temperature control. The *khökhüür* takes knowledge to sew and maintain. The benefit is said that *airag* tastes better when fermented in *khökhüür* and can be sold at higher prices. Looking at regional differences, Adaatsag has shifted to using plastic, whilst in Kharhorin there was once more plastic, but recently there has been an increase in return to *khökhüür* use as in the past.

Changes in horse raising

The number of horses fluctuated greatly between individual herders (<10 to 800 in Kharhorin, 25 to 400 in Adaatsag) whilst herder age averaged 52 in Kharhorin and 44 in Adaatsag. Though Adaatsag averaged 120 horses per person to Kharhorin's 80, the milking patterns and practices were similar in the two *soums*. Households in the former averaged 27 mares and 23 in the latter. Yet in both locations, herders milked around 12–13 mares a day. Though horse numbers differed, the main issue is the labour force for milking and *airag* production.

A recent dynamic was the advent of imported horses to increase racing abilities. Rather than pure breeds, the result has been crossbreeding. This has directly affected the quality of *airag* (Herder Household [HH] 4) and shown that hybrids require more attention and cost more for fodder. Sometimes spoken of as a threat to tradition, they were considered more difficult to raise. Both districts shared similar preferences, with horses also wanted for riding and meat.

'I have some cross breed/hybrid horses... But they are not resistant to cold weather. They need to be fed constantly. Therefore, I am focused on Mongolian breed now.' (HH10)

Natural environment

Most herders indicated that, over the last five to six years, the weather has fluctuated strongly. In the period from 2000–2017, natural hazards such as *dzud* (cold and snow-related disaster) and drought were happening once every five or six years. Now one year is good and then the next year is a *dzud* disaster, especially in 2023. After a cold winter, herders faced a cold, snowy, and windy spring. The mares suffered several miscarriages. This affected *airag* production and was common over the period from 2020–2023. For example, a herder explained that 'since 2020, spring has become harder and harder. The winter season is fine, but the spring is cold with dust storms, and there is no rain. In the past, it was better...we lost one season (HH5).'

According to herders' observations, the pasture quality has changed, indicated first by the disappearance of some plants. An increase in the number of livestock was a contributing factor to such changes, but pastoralists felt the main reason was climate change. For example, the previous year (2022), late rain and relatively cold temperatures restricted the growth of some plants. However, their geographical location and access to grazing in mountain areas in both regions allowed horses to get enough forage.

The changes were reflected in movement and migration to fresh pasture. Participants were asked about available pasture, increased competition from more herder families and greater livestock numbers. The expansion of agricultural

land was mentioned, and mining may also reduce pasture and water access. In Kharhorin the distance between camps ranged from four to seven kilometres, spread over four main seasonal migrations, with more in summer depending on pasture conditions. Herders did not change movement patterns during Covid-19, continuing as usual.

Milking horses

Milking, the essence of *airag*, is a long and well-kept tradition. The parameters and reasons evolve over time with *airag* considered essential to pastoralists' life and celebrations, a ritual and pleasure to be enjoyed. A successful herder in Kharhorin stated 'We have 100 horses and have not tried to increase the number. We keep them at the same level as it is now … and nature regulates this' (HH6). Of the 100 horses, thirty were mares and eleven were milked regularly. The number of mares milked in both *soums* averaged twelve or thirteen and was not dependent on the size of the herd but on the labour available.

The volume of *airag* produced varied annually. As one herder summarised, 'in 2000–2010 we milked 30–40 litres per day, in the years 2010–2020 we milked 50–60 litres per day. This year 70–80 litres per day … it's because the number of horses has increased' (HH13). Another noted that 'in 2020 we had 130 mares, in 2021, 130, in 2022, 180, and in 2023, 60 mares … we had a hard spring, heavy sandstorm … as a result of it, mares had miscarriages' (HH8). Fluctuations are then reflected in milk produced.

The milking season is another variable. In Kharhorin milking should traditionally start in June, 'before the sun goes back (the solstice)' (HH5). Another herder said, 'our milking season starts on 25 June and ends on 5 October' (HH7). In Adaatsag *soum* the season started in August and went on through September. If grass and weather allowed, they continued into October. Thus, the differing environmental conditions between the two *soums* gave Kharhorin a season of three to four months whilst Adaatsag had a two-month period. Respondents at both sites said that Covid-19 did not impact milking.

After the season length, the next variable is the amount of milking done and the number of times per day. One household told us, 'We start milking at 7 a.m. and last one is 6 p.m.' (HH1). In the summer, five or six times was a typical daily number of milkings in Kharhorin and four to five times a day in Adaatsag. For example, a household reported that 'we milk mares at intervals of 1 hour and 30 minutes in summer and in autumn extend to 2 hours' (HH5), which is a typical milking schedule seen in *airag* production. The numbers were similar, decreasing in autumn. This has been steady since 1990 and continued through the Covid-19 pandemic. Milking practices were consistent and reflect the amount of work required to collect horse milk. Patterns were similar in both sites.

Fermentation

Stirring

The method of monitoring stirring of *airag* has changed from counting each turn to keeping track by time. Traditionally herders counted, making 3,000 to 5,000/6,000 stirs a day. This job is usually done by children – it helps them to learn to count and it is physical exercise. But nowadays it is often done by set time, commonly 1, 1.5 or 2 hours daily. According to herders, one hour is equal to 3,000 stirs. A few herders indicated that in the past they used electric motors to stir the *airag* but did not find an advantage over the traditional method.

Starter

The starter, '*hörööng*', is little discussed in research on *airag* or *koumiss*. This essential ingredient is obtained by sharing or by purchasing it. This has not changed since the socialist period. In Kharhorin *soum*, most herders buy starters from vendors at the local market. The other source was from neighbouring herders or herders in the community who had already started making *airag*. Usually after tasting *airag* from several families, the herder picks the starter that has made good *airag* according to their taste. News of quality *airag* produced by a family spreads and others then come to take the starter from them. The herders know how to make starters, but think it is simpler to buy it rather than make it themselves. No examples of purchasing commercial starters were found.

Container

A big point of discussion was about what type of container made the best *airag*. Herders discussed the two options. The first is the traditional *khökhüür*, handmade from cow leather by a knowledgeable herder. The second method was to use a plastic receptacle, often the size of a barrel. Their size can vary greatly, from 40 to 200 litres at the field sites. Popular since the 2000s, the barrel is easy to move and keep clean whereas the *khökhüür* takes more cleaning and attention. Nowadays some families will use both containers. Three families had wooden containers that, though not for production, were used for *airag* storage. There was a period when herders used wooden containers, which was at the same time as *khökhüür* was used. Herders agree that the taste and quality of *airag* are different between the *khökhüür* and plastic barrels. The drinkers and buyers prefer *airag* from a *khökhüür*.

There was interest in bringing back the *khökhüür* as common usage had stopped in the early 2000s with the introduction of plastic barrels. Many obstacles to using the *khökhüür* were explained. Making one and maintaining its

condition is difficult and time consuming. Storing one when not in use and when transporting requires a special technique. In addition, the amount of milk and number of mares being milked has an important role in deciding on what type of container to use. If the number of mares is reduced, a smaller sized container is needed. Therefore, the blue plastic container may be preferable. The smallest size is forty litres whilst the smallest *khökhüür* is sixty litres. Also, herders indicated that plastic barrels are more convenient, have a lid, and are easier to transport.

Airag culture

With average ages of 52 (Kharhorin) and 44 (Adaatsag), herders typically represented middle aged and older residents. Customs and routines established during the socialist era and early years of democracy had become lifelong habits. Now there were signs that the younger generation was reducing *airag* consumption. Young people at both sites do not drink as much as the previous generation – they prefer beer. In part this is thought to come from familiarity with urban life, where beer is available whilst *airag* is less common. In Tsagaan Sar (New Year celebration) at the festive table, young family members drink *airag* only in small sips, preferring to drink beer.

All herders agree on the importance of *airag* as cultural heritage, reflected in cultural events such as the 'Celebration of Horseman Heritage' Festival described below. For example, at an Ovoo ceremony (a spiritual practice), or in the Naadam cultural festival in summer there are competitions of who can drink *airag* the fastest, or who has the best tasting *airag*. However, teenagers in the communities shared new traditions such as organising parties when up to twenty youths come together. They play games and drink *airag* all night and finish before the daily work starts. In some cases, parents are involved in organising and supporting such events. They take turns to host and provide transport to bring children home in the early morning. During the get-together, children meet each other, learn traditional games and become friends. It expands social networks among the younger generations. This creates an opportunity for local children and those visiting from the city during holiday time to play together.

To sell or not to sell?

Some herders will sell *airag* if they have the chance whilst others are resistant to selling. They may sell by themselves in towns or through middlemen at markets. Phones, social media and kin networks may be used. Yet older people often said selling *airag* is wrong because dairy products should be free for everybody, everyone has the right to have it. Because herders get it free ... by milking a mare. A thought expressed is that selling *airag* can be harmful to horses - yet

nowadays many people ignore and sell. 'Over the last 10 years those selling have increased as the process [for selling] became easier. Only 30 km to the paved road that goes to UB (the capital) and Dundgovi *aimag* centre. It allows you to make quick travel to the market' (HH13). The following excerpt from an interview transcript illustrates how one herder household we visited thought about selling *airag*:

> Herder: I do not sell much in summer. Mainly in winter. Last winter in 2022, I sold 100 litres for 5000 MNT per litre. People were buying as part of preparation for the Lunar New Year.
>
> Question: Are there people buying for other reasons such as health?
>
> Herder: No, the main reason is to prepare for the Lunar New Year.
>
> Question: Where did you sell?
>
> Herder: 'At the Dundgovi *aimag* centre. It is safer if you get orders by phone. Then you will be sure that customers wait for you, and you will be able to sell all the *airag*. Otherwise, you will have a problem and waste time.'
>
> Question: Do you know how many herders in your community sell the *airag* in winter? What about summer?
>
> Herder: I think out of 10 families it would be 6–7 households. I don't sell much. Only for those people, strangers who visit our *ger* and ask for *airag* for sale. Households with 15–20 mares will be able to make enough to sell *airag*. Otherwise, the *airag* is only enough for own consumption and we share with relatives and friends.
>
> Question: When is best to sell *airag*, in winter or summer?
>
> Herder: 'It doesn't matter. Most important is whether you have customers. The high demand is in winter before the Lunar New Year' (HH11).

A Celebration of Horseman Heritage Festival

During our fieldwork, we witnessed the local horsemen's festival in Dundgovi *aimag*, held next to an ancient temple that has become a popular destination for tourists. The event lasted for two days and attracted over 150 participants from several *soums* within the *aimag*, with some herders travelling over 100 kilometres to attend. The annual event was organised in September, at the end of the mare milking season, and comprised several contests where herders show their skill, and knowledge of tradition. The competitions include 'Best *Khökhüür*', 'Best tasty *Airag*', '*Airag* drinking contest', 'Play a finger game' (*dembeedekh, khuruudakh*) (single and team), 'Contest of the best horseman' (horsemen compete in catching

a horse) and 'Contest of wonderful pair of horses'. According to some herders, such events are aimed at popularising *airag* and reviving traditional methods of its production.

People were pleased with the organisation of such events and the support provided by the *aimag* and *soum* authorities for the revival of local traditions. One participant remarked, 'People of all ages participate in the event, and for us older individuals, it is heartening to see the youth getting involved, especially in making *khökhüür*. Many artisans showcase their work…The tradition is truly being revived.' However, some participants expressed concerns about the low attendance at the event. One commented,

> This year, there were fewer participants and spectators compared to last year, and not many foreign tourists attended. Despite the event's goal of popularising local traditions and attracting both national and international visitors, the turnout was noticeably lower. Therefore, it would be better to organize the event in August, before children return to school and before the end of the summer holidays.

Covid-19 and *airag*

Interviews with herders support the benefits of *airag* for protecting against Covid-19. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the demand for *airag* increased, then receded. In the early period of Covid-19 the supply could not keep up with demand. A herder we interviewed reported, 'My father always said that *airag* is a healthy dairy product rich in vitamins beneficial for the body. I became convinced of this during the Covid-19 pandemic. That's why we now try to share more with others. For example, last year we gave away over 50–60% of our *airag*, compared to 40–50% before the pandemic.' (HH10). The number of people looking for *airag* in the local *soum* dairy market was high, due to the belief in its effect of strengthening the immune system. For example, a herder explained, '*airag* helps boost immunity. When our family contracted Covid-19, the symptoms were mild for those who were affected. While I can't definitively say this was due to our custom of drinking *airag*, I can't rule it out either. Generally, drinking warmed *airag* in the winter seems to help prevent the flu – at least for us. We often consume it when we start to feel flu symptoms.' (HH4).

In addition to drinking, *airag* can also be applied to the skin, especially for children, such as when they bathe. The medical benefits go beyond the herders to children and grandchildren who visit the countryside during summer holidays. In winter, *airag* is important for those with a cold. Herders explained that when it is warmed before drinking the person will sweat and feel much better the next day. One family indicated they don't make tea and do not even drink it during

the summer – they only drink *airag*. It was claimed to have many vitamins that humans need. Overall Covid-19 did not influence the ways of raising horses. Other factors such as economics (the proximity to market, availability of labour) and environmental conditions (natural hazards, drought, shortage of pasture) had a stronger influence on *airag* production.

Discussion and conclusion

When herders were asked about changes related to *airag* production in 2023, their answers could apply to various time periods. The main difference was between the socialist era, which lasted until the early 1990s, followed by the transition to the democratic system, and current approaches. Whilst several aspects of *airag* production have been modified, interviews show that many practices and their cultural value have remained. When the pandemic occurred, herders' natural remoteness meant their livelihoods and *airag* production could continue as normal. Whilst Covid-19 increased demand for *airag*, it did not affect customary practices.

Both study regions are active *airag*-making districts as all 27 households interviewed stated that they make *airag*, even those who 'borrow' horses to milk. This suggests that herders find significance and value in making *airag*. Many cases indicated that they started making *airag* when they came to own their own herd, after helping their parents with milking since childhood. *Airag* was presented as 'sacred', with horses positioned as friends, the milk from each animal appreciated as a blessing of nature. When ready, a ceremony is held to offer *airag* to the heavens and is an integral part of festivals in the field sites. This includes its role in Naadam (national summer festival), Tsagaan Sar (New Year festival), weddings and ritual events. Some considered discourse was that one should avoid buying and selling *airag* for money as it is sacred; for example, 'Elders say selling *airag* is bad. There is a saying: who sells water gets rich, a person who sells milk becomes empty' (HH10).

Airag production remains steeped in Mongolians' cultural perspective. This is reflected in the emphasis on the mother–child relationship of the horse and foal, rearing and milking with plenty of freedom and the tendency to revere *airag*. The careful sewing of the cow skin containers and the hearty hours of hand stirring continue with a sense of nostalgia yet are changing. A key point was that, around 2000, there were changes in *airag* processing. As Mongolia's GDP started to rise, external influences began to reach the herders in steppe areas as well as in cities. This included the availability of store-bought products, economic pressures on herding, introduction of mobile phones and the internet and increased transportation and mobility.

How Production of Airag (Fermented Mare's Milk) is Changing

Population outflow to cities and modern food imports are changing *airag* production methods. In the grasslands, there is a labour shortage, while in the cities there is an increase in demand due to a return to traditional fermented foods in health-conscious people. It is interesting to note that, even with the labour shortage, there is no significant change in the *airag* production process, but rather a change in the scale of the process. The reason for the lack of change in manufacturing methods is that *airag* is a revered product for Mongolian herders, steeped in tradition involving horses, dairy products, alcoholic beverages and medicine. Outside Mongolia, for example in Russia, milking is done by machine and stirring is done with an electric mixer. However, even though the high cost of milking machines is one of the factors preventing their introduction, there was also a tendency to dislike the use of inexpensive mechanical stirrers, saying that they would reduce the quality of the milk, although their use is increasing in some areas. The exception is that the containers are changing from leather bags to plastic. Since 2000 more convenient plastic barrels have largely replaced cowskin bags. Yet there has been a strong push to preserve the *khökhüür* cowskin bags which were inscribed on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list in 2019. This is a reflection of *airag*'s enduring place and multi-faceted legacy in Mongolia. Nevertheless, plastic buckets are inexpensive and very convenient, so they are now often used in combination.

Including those outside the research area, there is a polarisation between those who make *airag* for their own consumption and those who are scaling up to sell to the cities. For some, *airag* is becoming a business, and this was accelerated by Covid-19. It is possible that the process itself will change in the same direction as cow milk production in the future, as seen with camel milk in other regions. However, changes in production methods may also lead to changes in quality and in people's health, as studies have shown that changing containers from leather bags to plastic has reduced the diversity of the *airag* flora. Genetic analysis of *airag* made in *khökhüür* and in the plastic bucket showed that *khökhüür* itself is likely a source of these bacterial species as well as providing a niche, and the wider volatility of temperature may allow the growth of this wide range of bacteria while maintaining a lower level of lactic acid fermentation (Shinoda et al., 2024).

Investigating *airag* in two Mongolian districts found that the population outflow to cities and modern food influences are impacting *airag* production by creating a labour shortage in grasslands and increasing demand in urban areas. Despite this, the traditional production methods remain largely unchanged due to *airag*'s cultural significance. The main change is the shift from leather bags to plastic barrels, influenced by practicality. A divide is emerging between small-scale producers for personal use and those scaling up for urban markets, a trend

accelerated by Covid-19. If commercialisation continues, production methods may industrialise, potentially affecting *airag*'s quality and health benefits due to reduced microbial diversity from using plastic barrels.

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❄ *Chapter 7* ❄

The Social Significance of Kazakh *Chai* Feasting in Mongolia

Chieko Hirota

Introduction

Evaluating the social significance of the *Chai* feast in Mongolia's Kazakh society highlights its cultural importance. While large-scale feasts (*Toi*) have developed into a social problem throughout Central Asia, household-scale feasts have been described as providing an opportunity to build regional household networks (Provis, 2015; Turdalieva and Provis, 2017; Werner, 1998, 1999). Since Mongolia's democratisation in 1990, feasts have flourished in response to the increased movement of ethnic Kazakhs from Mongolia to Kazakhstan and back. This chapter examines the interaction of Kazakh mobility, a sense of belonging and household relationships through feasts within families in Bayan-Ölgii Province in western Mongolia.

Feasts provide a stage for people to interact with each other, share cultural roles and obligations, and mark life stages. Understanding the characteristics and significance of feasts in Kazakh society clarifies their role in creating a sense of belonging. In the post-Soviet era, forty per cent of Mongolian Kazakhs moved to Kazakhstan for perceived better opportunities (Alff, 2013). Whilst challenging, such relocation has encouraged mutual exchange between the countries and communities through family connections (Finke, 2013). Migration, marriage, return visits with relatives and growing families are occasions celebrated by *chai* feasts.

The integration of Mongolian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan has proven more difficult than expected. Although some people acquired Kazakhstani citizenship, many migrants were unable to adjust to local life and eventually returned to Mongolia in the early 2000s (Finke, 2013; Oka, 2013). Through these migrations, Kazakh households in Mongolia usually have a family member or relative living in Kazakhstan. People continue to visit each other frequently to see their families and relatives. A certain nostalgia of migrants for their place of origin is related to the increased sense of identity connected to the place, among Kazakhs who

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remained in Mongolia (Barcus and Werner, 2015). Migration has made local Kazakhs more aware of the importance of their traditional cultural practices. This has encouraged them to create their own sense of homeland (*Tugan jer*), which is neither Mongolia nor Kazakhstan (Diener, 2009).

In this context, feasting is regarded as an essential social practice in people's lives. Kazakhs hold feasts mainly on ceremonial occasions, to share their joys and sorrows with others and to entertain those who gather together (Biqumal, 2013). Holding and participating in feasts supports a sense of social obligation; as they are repeated, interconnections are established. The process builds a sense of community connection that fosters belonging and encourages the concept of an elusive 'homeland' (Diener, 2009). Events were particularly popular after Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. Among the various types of feasts, the *Chai* and *Tileu Chai* are important. Since the pandemic, feasts have become strongly associated with strengthening family ties.

Bayan-Ölgii Province

Bayan-Ölgii Province in the westernmost part of Mongolia is located in the Altai Mountains, which extend into China (Xinjiang), Russia and Kazakhstan. Kazakhs comprise ninety per cent of the population, with traditional culture passed down through the generations. The Islamic faith, banned during the socialist period, has gradually been restored since democratisation in 1990 (Lkham, 2011). Cultural characteristics that differ from Mongolians have become an important attraction for foreign tourists. However, the province is not prosperous and has economically stagnated since democratisation.

As of 2024, the unemployment rate in the province was ten per cent (Bayan-Ölgii Aimgiin Statistikiin Kheltes, 2024), with some unemployment not reflected in the statistics. Pastoralism dominates, yet the majority of households have fewer than 200 livestock, which is low compared to other regions in Mongolia. In particular, those in their twenties and early thirties often lack stable income. The imbalance between living costs and income promotes human migration. People migrate for work to Ulaanbaatar or Kazakhstan, where ethnic Kazakhs are entitled to passports. Families may move or send children to university for future prospects (Politisch, 2012). Kazakhstan appeals because of the shared language, economic strength (double Mongolia's GDP) (World Bank, 2023) and the abundance of employment opportunities (Finke, 2013).

Kazakh social structure is patrilineal with important bonds between relatives (Krader, 1963). Relatives cooperate in everyday situations, child-rearing, labour and rituals such as marriage and funerals. They may give financial advice and lend money. In-laws are respected and relatives support each other in times

of need. Their cooperation is essential for migration (Finke, 2013). The male head of the household makes the decision and women who marry into the family are obliged to migrate with their husband or his relatives (Werner and Barcus, 2015). After moving, women often visit their families in Bayan-Ölgii. Travel to Kazakhstan is long and arduous. Family reunions are costly, with travel taking a long time.

Feasts with relatives

Household feasts are occasions for interaction between relatives. Most common is a small-scale feast called '*chai*', the word meaning 'tea'. *Chais* are held to share good events, such as a child's birthday or the purchase of a new car or house. The *Nauriz* spring festival, the Islamic feast of sacrifices (Eid al-Adha), and the end of Ramadan (Eid al-Fitr) are also important feast times. Pastoralists hold *Chais* when they move between seasonal camps or when large livestock are born.

A grander feast called '*Tileu Chai*' is held for celebrations, such as weddings and funerals, and when wishing for the happiness of family and relatives. The word '*Tileu*' means 'prayer'. For example, there is a cradle feast to celebrate the birth of a baby and a feast to celebrate the growth of a child. *Tileu Chai* is also held when praying for the happiness of the dead. Feasts are held to celebrate the safe journey of guests returning from afar, or to pray for the safety of those about to depart. In addition, wedding banquets are usually held as *Tileu Chai*, with the exception of wedding receptions held outside the home, which is more of a modern trend.

The feasting process starts with inviting the guests. Unlike large-scale feasts, *Chais* do not require prior formal invitations. The invitees are mainly relatives, in-laws, friends and neighbours. In-laws, who are the most respected people for Kazakhs, are always invited. Usually, the invitation is extended to households or couples. Eight to fifteen people gather for a *Chai,* and around thirty people for a *Tileu.* Unless there is a good reason to decline, those who are invited must participate. The event is usually held at the host's home, particularly in a *ger*. The *ger* is not just a place to live, but a dwelling that symbolises Kazakh culture. The hostess decorates with furnishings featuring Kazakh patterns in preparation for guests. A disorderly *ger* signifies laziness. In my other research, it has become clear that the number and variety of these decorated furnishings have been increasing since 2000 (Hirota, 2023a).

The most important part of the feast preparations is the food. There are always small fried breads made from flour (*bauirsaq*), butter (*sari mai*), dried cheese (*kurt*), tea with milk and mutton. These dishes are typically Kazakh, whose food culture is based on livestock. People are most particular about *kurt* and

meat. The taste of *kurt* differs depending on the climate of the region where it is made, the type of milk used and the preparation method. It is easy to see the maker's labour and taste its regional characteristics (Hirota, 2023b). Attention is paid to whether the meat is freshly slaughtered. However, for *chai,* it is sufficient to prepare a dish with meat. Since democratisation, the influence of Kazakhstan has led to the provision of sweets, fruit and salads at *Tileu Chai* (Finke, 2017). The feasts cannot be held without the work of women; they depend on women's active participation (Werner, 1997).

On the feast day, the host places food on the floor or a table to welcome the guests. The guests have to bring dairy products, sweets, etc. as gifts called *tuiinchek*, meaning 'knot', which refers to the knot in the *furoshiki*/cloth wrapping the gift. The guests also bring a celebratory gift or a cash contribution that covers part of the cost, sometimes up to half. Feasts are an opportunity to create a state of mutual indebtedness (Werner, 1998). When the guests come, the host first offers them tea. While drinking, the guests eat the dairy products and *bauirsaq* and wait for the main dish to be served. During this time, people discuss recent events, matters for consultation, offer congratulations, sing songs and give contributions and gifts. This is the moment that people look forward to the most. The male host plays the role of entertaining the guests. When the meat arrives, the eldest person recites a congratulatory prayer, wishing happiness for the people gathered there before eating the meat. The meat is cut up by the older men. Strictly speaking, there are various rules about how to eat the meat. The host shares the roasted sheep's head skin and thigh meat with the guests. These parts are considered to be particularly delicious. Afterwards, the broth is drunk as soup and the gathering breaks up.

This reflects a set type for feasts that both the host and the guests are consciously aware of. By entertaining their guests in accordance with the established format, hosts show respect for their guests and maintain their own social pride. For Kazakhs, it is a shame (*uyt*) to fail to do this properly (Werner, 1999). On the other hand, by accepting an invitation and participating in the feast, the guest shows respect for the host and satisfies the other person's need for social recognition. If declining, one incurs the host's resentment (*renju*).

Research methods

Since 2011, I have been conducting anthropological research on the decorative culture of the Kazakhs in Bayan-Ölgii Province (Hirota, 2023a). This ethnographic research on feasts was conducted through site visits between 2018 and 2024. The research subjects were three Kazakh households and the couples in each household were born during the socialist period. Repeated research visits

over the years to the same families focused on specific individual cases to evaluate the process of holding feasts. Trust over years of interactions enabled detailed knowledge of income and private matters (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Household information.

	Household A	Household B	Household C
Location	Ölgii city	Bulgan to Ölgii city	Sagsai
Generation	1950s/1960s	1960s	1970s
Relatives in Kazakhstan	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income	300 to 400 USD/month	175 USD/month	110 USD/month
Livestock	0	0	150

Household A lives in Ölgii, an urban area. The couple has two married daughters; the second daughter moved to Kazakhstan after getting married. In 2023, their main source of income was a state pension. They do not own livestock. Household B is originally from Bulgan County but, due to the economic situation in rural areas during the pandemic, they moved to Ölgii City in 2021. They have six children, all but one married. Some of their relatives live in Kazakhstan, but all their children live in Bayan-Ölgii Province. Household C raises livestock in Sagsai County. They have five children. In 2023, the two older daughters had married and left home; the eldest moved to Kazakhstan in 2019. Income came from livestock products such as cashmere, the sale of live animals, livestock management fees and child-rearing allowances.

While staying with each family for one week each year, I conducted informal interviews about their economic situation, the circumstances and frequency of hosting and being a guest at feasts, the cost, and their opinions about feasts. During this time, I unexpectedly participated in feasts. During the pandemic period of 2020–2022, fieldwork was not possible. In August 2022 and January 2023, research regarding the holding of feasts continued via video calls with the wives or daughters of each household.

Feasts supported by social obligation

The style of feasts in the three households is similar in terms of the number of times they are held and the cost (Table 7.2). All of them hold *Chai*s more than ten times a year. Household C, specialising in livestock farming, holds frequent *Chai*s because they look after their livestock together with several other households during the summer. The frequency of participation in *Chai* varies depending on the time of year. Usually, people attend three to four times a month, but during events like the *Nauriz* spring festival, they may attend fifteen to twenty *Chais*

on average. The frequency of hosting and attending *Tileu Chais* is influenced by factors such as the number of relatives and children, and the age of the children. I was told that they usually held a *Tileu Chai* to celebrate marriage, growth of children and to welcome relatives from far away. The frequency of hosting is usually once or twice a year for each household. The frequency of participation was once or twice a month, but during the summer months, they sometimes attend three or four times a month.

Table 7.2 The average frequency and cost of feasting.

	Chai		Tileu Chai	
Frequency	Host	10 times/ year	Host	Once or twice/ year
	Guest	3 to 20 times/ month	Guest	Once or twice/ month
Cost	Host	30 to 80 USD	Host	200 to 500 USD
	Guest	3 to 5 USD	Guest	7 to 30 USD

According to each family, the number of occasions for feasting has increased since democratisation. One of the main occasions for holding a *Tileu Chai* was to welcome and send off visitors from Kazakhstan. Kazakh migrants usually return home for large-scale feasts (*Toi*) such as wedding receptions. Those living in Mongolia hold small-scale feasts at home for those who have returned. In addition, the number of family reunions, which are equivalent to *Tileu Chai*, has increased, influenced by the style of feasts in Kazakhstan.

People have diverse views on the trend of frequent feasts. When I asked people if there was a particular *Chai* that left a particularly strong impression, the wife of Household C replied, 'All the *Chais* are the same, so I don't really look back on them, but I think a good *Chai* is one where a lot of food is served and someone tells an interesting story that makes you laugh a lot. Also, it's good if there's always singing. The time when everyone sings together is fun and it's a good way to relieve stress' (18 August 2024). For some people, a feast is a way of periodically resetting their repetitive daily lives. Even if they view feasts positively, there are also those who are concerned about the cost. When the same question was asked of the daughter of Household B, who was born in 1990, she replied in the individual interview as follows: 'Feasts are fun. I especially like the *Chai*, which is like a cradle *Chai* that celebrates the birth of a child, and which gives you a sense of Kazakh cultural customs. However, I don't often hold feasts at my house. I need the money for my children's education, rather than wasting it on feasts' (22 August 2024).

The cost of holding a *Chai* was between 30 and 80 USD (Table 7.2). This is about one-fifth or less of the average monthly income of each surveyed household. When people attend a *Chai*, they are expected to bring the equivalent of 3–5 USD or food such as sweets and dairy products. The cost of hosting a *Tileu Chai* was 200–500 USD, which was about the same as or slightly more than the monthly income of each household. The cost of a feast that requires gifts related to marriage rituals is expensive. The cost of participating in a feast ranges from 7–30 USD per person, depending on the relationship with the host. Based on the number of guests who attend, feast costs may be more or less covered by the cash brought by the guests.

However, the cost of the feast is not always recoverable. In July 2018, Household C invited the wife's aunt, who lives in Kazakhstan, to a *Tileu Chai* (25 July 2018). On this day, 25 people gathered in their yurt. When the guests arrived, the food laid out on the floor consisted of dairy products such as *bauirsaq*, *kurt* and *sari mai,* as well as a small amount of sweets. For a *Tileu Chai* hosted by a herder in the countryside, it is not expected to have a lot of things such as sweets and fruits. However, to demonstrate the host's sincerity, they must slaughter an animal, such as a sheep. This can be considered an economic loss for the pastoralists. Household C did not collect the participation fee from their guests that was equivalent to the cost of one animal.

In addition, households that do not own livestock and live in urban areas need to purchase an animal when hosting a feast, which can be a significant expense. In June 2019, when Household B was still in Bulgan County, they held a *Tileu Chai* for giving dowry and invited about thirty people to their yurt dwelling (15 June 2019) (Figure 7.1). In the Mongolian Kazakh community, after the wedding ceremony, the bride's parents give gifts to the bride, her husband and the husband's family and relatives. However, the feast to give the gifts is hosted by the groom's parents. At this time, Household B was on the groom's side, so the cost was less than the bride's side. Costs were around 200 USD to buy livestock, dairy products such as *kurt* and *sari mai*, fruit, sweets and vegetables for salads. In addition, the walls were beautifully decorated with many wall hangings. Some of these had been newly purchased at the market. At the time, a wall hanging sewn on a sewing machine cost about 30 USD.

Feasts take time as well as money. The wife of Household A earns extra income by making embroidered goods, but in summer, when there are many guests, the pace of production slows down. She said, 'The number of feasts has increased since socialism. Feasts are putting pressure on people's lives' (2 June 2019). She also complained that she felt annoyed that the pace of her work was often disrupted by visitors.

Figure 7.1: Tileu chai held inside a yurt. Photo by the author.

The increase in the number of feasts and the fact that they have continued to be held is related to people's awareness of their social obligations, expressed by concepts of 'resentment' and 'shame'. In August 2018, the wife of household C attended a children's birthday party held in the neighbourhood with her daughter. On that occasion, they gave the host family some dairy products and about 4 USD as a gift. When I asked this wife about the relationship with the host family, she said that they were not particularly related, but that 'it would be shame (*uyt)* if we didn't go even though we were invited' (17 August 2018).

During the *Nauriz* in 2024, the couple from household A visited 22 households for *chai* over the course of six days, but actually they had received more invitations. The wife said with a wry smile, 'I'm tired of *Chai*, so I want to turn down the invitations, but if I don't give some kind of reason, people will resent me, so I've decided to hold a *Chai* party at my house' (30 March 2024). This is almost like a joke, but it shows how much people want to avoid creating resentment. The wife said, 'if I don't go to a chai when I'm invited, people will say I'm ungrateful, so I can't normally refuse to go. However, with prices rising, it's becoming more difficult to attend all the feasts' (30 March 2024). I once offended a Kazakh family because I unexpectedly declined their invitation due to scheduling. The hosts had been looking forward to my visit and had even prepared meat, and they were upset that I had not shown them respect. After that, when

I heard the voice message asking me why I hadn't visited, I felt uncomfortable. It is said that things like this can sometimes happen even between Kazakhs.

Forbidden feasts

Feasts have been a regular part of people's lives, but the Covid-19 pandemic was the first time they were banned. For about a year and a half from March 2020, the movement of people and goods was restricted in Bayan-Ölgii to prevent the spread of infection. People living in urban areas were strictly controlled even when walking around the city. If they were found to be out without a reason, they were fined. According to Household B, it was difficult to meet their daughter and son-in-law in Ölgii, so they would secretly drive to see them.

After the pandemic had subsided, people began to move around again from spring 2022 onwards and feasts of all sizes began to be held again one after another. According to a telephone interview in August 2022, household B held four *Tileu Chai* in the six months from January 2022. One was a housewarming party, the others celebratory banquets for the husband's 'Order of Labour' award from Mongolia. *Tileu* guests were divided into groups of relatives, in-laws, friends and local supporters and invited separately. Household B held a large feast to celebrate their grandchildren's entrance into higher education. The wife took out a loan against her pension. According to the daughter, feasts were held again soon after the pandemic, but many people were struggling financially at that time. Some people held small feasts instead of large feasts, others combined several forms of hospitality (22 August 2024).

Even Household A, less keen on hosting, held three *Tileu* feasts in a year. Two were to welcome home their second daughter from Kazakhstan after the pandemic, and the other to thank the person who helped their son-in-law find a new job. They borrowed a total of 1,765 USD from the bank and relatives to cover the cost of the three *Tileu Chai* feasts and immediate living expenses. Between June and August 2022, the couple attended twelve *Tileu Chai* feasts, more in three months than the year before the pandemic. They also attended countless *Chais*.

When I asked each household about their experiences during the pandemic, the wife of Household A said that she was afraid that she would never be able to see her daughter again because of the pandemic restrictions on movement (30 June 2023). The couple was overjoyed at the return of their second daughter, and they held a feast to share their joy with their relatives. The relatives of Household A also held a tea party for the second daughter, and she visited twenty houses in one month. According to the wife of Household A, the second daughter tried to bring back the dairy product *kurt* when she returned

from Mongolia to Kazakhstan, even though it was prohibited (20 August 2024). Because the taste of this *kurt* differs from that of Kazakhstan, it is considered a taste of home for those who have emigrated to Kazakhstan. She was truly happy to be able to return to her hometown.

In 2023, I asked the husband of household C about the situation during the pandemic. He said that in rural areas restrictions were looser than in towns, and they occasionally held events on the scale of the *Tileu Chai*. For them, the pandemic was a disease of the city, and people were only careful about infection when they were travelling from the countryside to the city. However, when his mother passed away in June 2020, his daughters in Kazakhstan were unable to gather for the funeral and the subsequent feast. He said, 'Before the pandemic, we would always gather for ceremonial occasions, including those who had moved to Kazakhstan, but during it, travel restrictions were strict, so we couldn't see our distant family. That was sad and hard' (11 July 2023). The eldest daughter of this family married in 2018 and moved to Kazakhstan in 2019. During the pandemic, they used internet video calls to keep in touch every day. The eldest daughter returned home in July 2023 for the first time in four years, and is planning to return again in 2024 to celebrate the marriage of the third daughter. The couple was looking forward to hosting several feasts for them during that time.

Discussion: Movement, feasts and family after the pandemic

Feasts in the Kazakh community in Mongolia have increased due to migration and the accompanying rise in ethnic consciousness against a backdrop of economic circumstances since democratisation. People have continued to create a sense of belonging by sharing food that evokes nostalgia and meat that has been slaughtered for guests, gathering in spaces that give a sense of togetherness, and repeat this daily. This custom, which became even more popular after democratisation and with the rise of ethnic consciousness, was supported by a sense of social obligation expressed in terms of shame and resentment if one failed to observe it. However, people felt the burden of economic and time constraints. The custom of hosting feasts could be said to have continued out of habit, but the pandemic was the first time it was banned. After the pandemic, the custom of hosting feasts quickly returned. This was because the social significance of feasts as something that brings families together was reaffirmed. In recent years, as transport infrastructure and internet access have improved, opportunities for cross-border family interaction have been increasing. However, the pandemic highlighted the actual physical distance between Kazakhs in Mongolia and their families living in Kazakhstan.

Now that the pandemic is over, human migration is once again increasing. There are many reasons for this. One of them is the rise in prices in Bayan-Ölgii. Just as after democratisation, the imbalance between income and living expenses is a factor that encourages people to move. For example, the price of one kilogram of mutton in July 2023 was 4 USD, which is 1.5 times higher than in 2019 (Bayan-Ölgii Aimgiin Statistikiin Kheltes, 2024). Meanwhile, industry in Bayan-Ölgii has been slow to recover after the pandemic, with the exception of tourism in some areas with tourist resources: According to Household B, the area that has seen the most significant movement of people is Bulgan County, furthest from Bayan-Ölgii. With the border to Xinjiang, China closed due to the pandemic, prices increased. Snow disasters have occurred frequently since 2020, with a major impact on the lives of the nomadic herders. As a result, many households are considering moving to Ölgii City, like Household B, or moving to Kazakhstan to increase income. In another survey, I also met a Kazakh family who had moved to Almaty in Kazakhstan for economic reasons, having moved there to be closer to relatives originally from Bulgan County (3 August 2023). Some people decide to move for the sake of their children's education. Many people think that sending their children to study abroad in countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkey will lead to employment. Household C also sent their daughter to study at a university in Kazakhstan. It is expected that this kind of migration for employment and education will continue to increase in the future.

However, even if the pandemic has made people feel the physical distance from their families, migration with the aim of joining family members living in Kazakhstan has not become popular. All of the households I surveyed expressed a desire to remain in Bayan-Ölgii. Household A said that, although their daughter was urging them to move to Kazakhstan, they had no intention of doing so, considering the climate and their age (20 August 2024). Some consider the summer heat and humidity in Kazakhstan to be uncomfortable and is identified as an important criterion for Kazakhs in Mongolia when deciding to move. Household C considered moving to Kazakhstan in 2018 and prepared to sell the ornaments they used inside their yurt and their winter camp. In spring 2019, the husband visited Kazakhstan and considered the possibility of moving there. Among the people who helped them at this time were the relatives whom Household C had entertained in July 2018. In the end, Household C decided not to emigrate. The main reason for this was the significant difference in climate between Kazakhstan and Mongolia (24 July 2019). According to Household B, people who have recently emigrated from Mongolia tend to move to areas with a climate similar to that of Bayan-Ölgii, such as Pavlodar and Semei in northern Kazakhstan, rather than to large cities such as Almaty (22 August 2024). Many people are unable to adapt to the local environment, including the climate, and

return to Bayan-Ölgii Province without acquiring Kazakh nationality, and there is a high frequency of such migration that is not reflected in the statistics. In particular, the elderly are resistant to changing their way of life and, as a result, families continue to live apart. This means that, for those who were born and raised in Ölgii, the decision to migrate is difficult.

At the same time, this situation suggests that Ölgii society is aging. Looking at the statistics, life expectancy in Bayan-Ölgii is gradually increasing, and is the highest in the country (Bayan-Ölgii Aimgiin Statistikiin Kheltes 2024). This trend of aging, combined with rising prices, could cause a change in the social significance of feasts. As Household A mentioned, with the rise in prices since the pandemic, it is becoming more difficult to hold feasts as before. And Household A and C were prioritising feasts to welcome distant family members. In particular, elderly couples like Household A are finding it increasingly difficult to travel to Kazakhstan. This will further increase the importance of hosting feasts at home. In addition, for young households that remain in Ölgii, it is expected that the trend of *Chai* feasts will become more common in personal relationships between friends rather than within the family. In recent years, it has been reported that large-scale marriage ceremonies are being held in bars and restaurants (Yagi, 2020) but, according to a daughter of Household B, the younger generation prefers to hold these receptions, which had previously been held on a household scale, outside the home, even for relatives and classmates (August 22, 2024). If this trend continues, it will have an impact on the standards of social obligations reinforced by the desire to avoid shame and resentment in the future.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the social significance of Kazakh feasts, focusing on the mobility of Kazakhs, their sense of belonging, and the interaction of human relationships within the family. The Kazakhs of Bayan-Ölgii in Mongolia have maintained their cultural characteristics within the local community by frequently holding and repeating the same household-scale feasts, and in this way have given concrete form to their sense of belonging to a particular land since democratisation. While the role of feasts has been to form social ties and territorial identity, the pandemic has brought about changes in what people seek in feasts. The three families I surveyed told me that the most painful thing about the pandemic was not being able to see their families. After the pandemic, the purpose of the feasts was to express the joy of seeing each other again; this strengthened the bonds between family members and relatives. As the younger generation moves out and the population of Bayan-Ölgii ages, there are signs

of change in the way that the feasts are held. The social significance of these feasts can be seen more in the aspects of reuniting with distant family members, relieving social stress and strengthening attachment to one's homeland.

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❄ *Chapter 8* ❄

Wild Botanicals of Inner Asia in the Times of a Global Health Crisis

Sayana Namsaraeva

Introduction

A vast region including arid steppe and dry mountains, mighty rivers and the taiga forests, Inner Asia has an unequal distribution of natural resources. The existence of local flora and fauna, many unique to Inner Asian ecological niches, has been threatened by human activity ranging from deforestation, overgrazing and ploughing to the expansion of mining and industrial sites (Bumochir, 2020). This chapter contributes to academic discussion of human interventions in the ecology of this region, when new resources are appropriated from the natural world and traded in expanding markets (High, 2017; Munkh-Erdene and Sneath, 2018; Waters, 2023). It examines how, following the Covid-19 pandemic, wild plants of the Inner Asian region became a coveted raw material highly demanded in global markets. In this way, a resource primarily only used locally came to be exploited by a global pharmacology industry through a complicated web of transnational added value chains that came to connect peripheral Inner Asian areas in eastern Siberia and eastern Mongolia with international markets. I will argue that uncontrolled exploitation of a botanical natural resource on an industrial scale has potentially devastating ecological and social consequences.

In making this argument, I focus on the 'commodification avenue' of a wild herb called *Saposhnikovia divaricata* (*Saposhnikovia* for short), a medicinal herb which has been widely used in Asian traditional medicine (Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chinese) to treat digestive disorders and various inflammations. Moreover, recent findings proving the effectiveness of *Saposhnikovia* roots extract to treat damaged lungs in post-Covid conditions (Yuen, 2020), made it a vital ingredient in various herbal formulas to protect from Covid-19 infection and for post-Covid treatments (Yang et al., 2016). Writing about the booming herbal supplements trade, Armbrecht (2021) observes that international botanical supply networks have become complex and hard to identify, so that

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few consumers understand where supplements are sourced. This chapter tries to identify a complex network and its components by following the journey of *Saposhnikovia* from wild-collection sites to argue that the growth, harvesting, processing of *Saposhnikovia,* and the impacts on communities and environments are still little understood, and the journey from wild plant to industrial herb proves to be fraught and perilous.

Biosocial milieu of *Saposhnikovia divaricata*

As a wild perennial plant, *Saposhnikovia* grows widely in North Asia and the Far East, mostly at the fringes of river valleys and along roadsides and waste places, including grassy and stony slopes. As a plant indigenous to several countries, other names include *chikher ündes* (sweet root) in Mongolian, *fangfeng* (guarding against the wind) in Chinese and colloquially *dikii selderei* (wild celery) and *muzhik koren* (man root) in Russian. Interestingly, all parts of *Saposhnikovia* – leaves, flowers, seeds, stem, and roots – are used to heal various health disorders in humans and cattle as a painkiller, sedative, anti-allergic and antifebrile botanical (Yang et al., 2016). Inner Asian herders often use a pungent concoction brewed from leaves and stems to treat cattle nutritional disorders. Roots, ground to powder, are used externally to treat other livestock afflictions, such as injured joints and skin diseases or eye inflammation (Munkhzul, 2021).

Saposhnikovia's thick and extensive root structure is more complex than its above-ground growth. The roots contain much water and are able to share moisture and water content with other rhizomes and roots to help plants, trees and other species such as bugs and worms, during drought and dry seasons. This capacity to maintain soil moisture and biodiversity makes *Saposhnikovia* valuable for sustaining fragile Inner Asian steppe environments (Munkhzul, 2021) and cross-species symbiosis. *Saposhnikovia*'s active properties were recognised by Asian medicinal traditions which treat it as a 'prized herb' (Xu et al., 2019) for its ability to do much biochemical work and produce a range of biologically active substances such as anomalin, hyperoxides, phenolic compounds, essential oils – all stored in the roots (Urbagarova et al., 2018). Special techniques and methods to carefully extract active substances from the roots have been developed by regional medicinal traditions, taking account of its vegetation cycle, season and harvest time for mature, productive roots, and regeneration period. Furthermore, in *Sowa Rigpa* – the Tibetan medical system widely practised in Inner Asia – careful extraction of natural substances from *Saposhnikovia* roots for medicine requires bodily discipline and coordinated labour between harvesters and local herbal specialists, who are often religious practitioners – *emch* lamas – in local lamaseries (Chudakova, 2017). According to the traditional

Sowa Rigpa practice, cleanliness and refraining from alcohol and tobacco to keep the senses clean are important, so as not to poison medicinal properties stored in the roots. However, as illustrated later, these collecting and processing techniques are not followed in the drive to maximise profits. As my fieldwork observations suggest, root pickers and traders ignore these rules or simply are not aware of local herbal medicinal traditions.

Saposhnikovia 'gold rush': Encounters in the fields and online

In the summer of 2020, most of world was in Covid-19 lockdown and social activities were restricted: the reduction and suspension of customary economic practices, transport restrictions and border closures stopped livelihoods. In contrast, the Siberian countryside, where I spent part of the pandemic lockdown with my family, became unusually busy and highly socially engaged. To my surprise, when I made a visit to meet elderly relatives in Aginskoe, a village in the Transbaikal region of Eastern Siberia, many of their houses were locked when I tried to pop in. 'These days everybody is out', commented a taxi driver, suggesting that I visit these families after sunset. 'Old and young, disabled and weak, those with jobs and jobless – nowadays they all are in the fields to dig *Saposhnikovia*.' This is how I learned that harvesting *Saposhnikovia* had become a new source of income for the people most affected by strict lockdown regimes in rural Siberia. Most members of the local community were involved in the new 'Business of Botanicals', and local newspapers compared this booming new economic activity to a historical 'gold rush', though now it was for wild *Saposhnikovia* roots (Voronova, 2020).

As Zhargal, one of my relatives in Aginskoe, who was involved in the *Saposhnikovia* business, told me, the rush of international buyers exploiting medicinal roots in the Transbaikal region had started prior to 2020. The Covid-19 outbreak only heightened their interest in Siberian botanicals due to a rapid increase in international demand for herbal remedies to combat Covid. Since Zhargal became active in trading *Saposhnikovia* before 2020, he shared with me an 'early history' of the business,

> Initially, the *Saposhnikovia* 'rush' had originated in Inner Mongolia. When the Chinese exhausted their resources, they started buying it in neighbouring Mongolia. The Mongols started digging out the roots in their eastern provinces seven or eight years ago to sell to China. Each pharmacy on the Chinese side was ready to buy *Saposhnikovia* roots, because it is in great demand there. The Mongols were harvesting *Saposhnikovia* roots along the

> Onon river until it runs into Russia. So, after they dug everything out in Inner Mongolia and then in Mongolia, they arrived here – in Russia.[1]

Zhargal called the transborder Onon river valley – stretching from Mongolia to Russian Siberia – the '*Saposhnikovia* Belt'. Visa-free travel between the two countries allowed Mongolian middlemen and poachers to continue their foraging along the Russian section of the '*Saposhnikovia* Belt' in the Transbaikal region. Here they introduced a new business opportunity to the locals. According to Zhargal, Mongolian middlemen were quickly replaced by Chinese intermediaries, who had more resources in Russia, including connections with the local Chinese diaspora. The diaspora in Eastern Siberia (Russia) was well established in business and actively engaged in exporting natural resources, such as timber and jade, to China (Namsaraeva, 2018; Safonova et al., 2018). And Chinese residents were quick to mobilise their resources and connections to purchase locally foraged *Saposhnikovia* roots in most villages.

For example, Zhargal, working in close cooperation with Chinese businessmen, built his own sourcing network in the Aginsky district using cash provided by his Chinese partners. He made agreements with owners of local groceries to buy roots sorted and packed in boxes. Each week Zhargal visited these shops to pay in cash for boxes of fresh roots. These travelled with him about 700 kilometres to Ulan-Ude, where he rented a warehouse to process the roots. They were quickly dehydrated at high temperatures in large warehouses. Dried roots were calibrated according to the required size and thickness, 10–12 centimetres long and no thinner than a pencil. These standards were imposed by Chinese middlemen according to requirements of the Chinese pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies who were the next players in the *Saposhnikovia* value-added chain. In this stage of transborder commodification, dried roots were delivered by Zhargal's Chinese partners to their counterparts near Harbin in north-east China. There, at the pharmaceutical plants, the roots were processed into the in-demand pharmacological herbal raw material.

However, Zhargal's local network source of *Saposhnikovia* roots was soon challenged by a competing Chinese businessman with a Russian nickname, Andrey. Andrey had recently moved to Aginskoe from the regional capital city of Chita, and his local landlord agreed to introduce me to him. With initial information about Andrey and why he had moved to Aginskoe provided by his landlord, I understood that Andrey wanted to keep some parts of the local value chain under his own control to maximise his profit and to make the *Saposhnikovia* business more efficient. To compete with the locals, who went to

1. All translations from Chinese, Buryat, Mongolian and Russian languages are mine unless another translator is indicated.

the fields individually or in small groups to dig out roots close to their villages, Andrey's scale of business required a larger organisation and higher expenditure. He built several tented camps in remote places which were difficult to reach for local root pickers. Andrey started bringing groups of homeless people and other marginalised residents to the field from neighbouring Chita city. Daily payment for the hired labour was based on how many roots were harvested during a day. After paying some accommodation fees for a sleeping place in the tents, 'colonists' spent their daily salaries ordering local food deliveries, including tobacco and alcohol, from nearby villages. As the *Saposhnikovia* 'gold rush' increased, temporary tented camps became an attractive place for other local businesses. Ordering anything was possible by mobile phones or messaging to local online groups: sleeping bags, camping equipment and special tools to dig out *Saposhnikovia* roots were delivered directly to the tented colonies.

Online encounters

Very quickly, all aspects of the local botanical business went online, and thematic chat groups were set up on WhatsApp and Viber mobile applications. News and other developments were available on several chat groups, such as '*Vesti s polei*' (News from the field), '*Korni 2020*' (Roots, 2020), '*Tseny vsekh priemok kornei ABO*' (Prices across all stock reception points in Aginsky Buryat Okrug), etc. These online groups enabled people to join any segment of the *Saposhnikovia* business chain. This went from the very bottom – a digger in the field – to the bulk sale middlemen groups, to trading dried roots ready for export to China. For example, having no funds to invest in the botanical business, one could go to the fields near one's village. This was an option for teenagers and elders without transport. They collected a limited number of roots, up to 10–12 kilograms, which could be carried on their shoulders. Having some money made it possible to form an online group of individuals to hire cars and minibuses to travel to more remote locations where harvesting the roots was more productive. In this case, the amount of a daily harvest could be measured in dozens of kilograms. By making more investments (like Andrey), one could recruit labour via messaging services to work in the remote fields, hire buses to bring pickers to the field sites and pay cash for their daily harvest. Surfing through messages in online chat groups, one could compare root prices in different parts of the Transbaikal region, then buy cheaply and sell expensive roots in bulk to increase profits. However, each stage in the *Saposhnikovia* 'gold rush' was associated with specific risks and unexpected dangerous turns. This made the root business unprofitable for many and profitable only for a few in the business 'food chain'. Unhappy stories from several of my informants showed how each stage of the value-added chain had a specific apex predator species parasitising the *Saposhnikovia* business.

Criminal encounters

Several Siberian regions – the Buryat Republic and the TransBaikal region – have listed *Saposhnikovia* in their regional 'Red List of Threatened Animals and Plants' (*Krasnaya Kniga*) (2010). However, it received Red List Grade 4 status, which meant that its official endangered status was still 'uncertain' (*neopredelennyi status*). The ambiguity of this 'uncertain' status meant that though *Saposhnikovia* was placed in the Red List, it still doesn't require special protection measures as was stated in the regional 'Red List of Threatened Animals and Plants' (2010). Consequently, the *Saposhnikovia* business falls into a grey zone of semi-legal economic activity with much potential for corruption. As some encounters will reveal, the roots' balancing between legal and illegal status exposed many local businesses to the risk of arrest and confiscation of the harvest.

Andrey, the Chinese businessman, whom I mentioned earlier, had lived in Russia for ten years. His command of Russian language allowed him to work without having any local or other Chinese middlemen. Andrey successfully created his own added-value chain, which he regulated and controlled himself, from the fields in the Aginsky district to a China–Russia border crossing point. He collected what his labour force harvested each day – approximately 2,000 to 3,000 kilograms. The next stage was a speedy dehydration process, where, after intense evaporation, the roots shrank to half or a third of their original size. Andrey built two large greenhouses in the rear of his rented house for dehydration. Inside these greenhouses were wide shelves from top to bottom along the two walls. Several diesel heaters were drying the air inside each of the greenhouses to speed up evaporation, though it was possible the high temperature would destroy the therapeutic effect of oils contained in the roots. On one visit by his landlord and me, Andrey was busy repairing a wall of one of his greenhouses. A thick polyethylene covering on the walls of the greenhouse had knife cuts in several places. Thieves had taken almost all of the roots stored in the greenhouse, as well as the five diesel heaters. Andrey was very upset and angry about the break-in. According to him, the loss was approximately US $15,000–18,000, as semi-dry and dry roots stored in the greenhouses were almost three times more expensive than fresh roots. In broken Russian, Andrey was complaining to my companion about the difficulties he faced on a daily basis and how insecure and costly the botanical business was:

> You have to pay 'bandity' (criminals), you have to pay 'menty' (police), you have to pay 'MChS' (emergencies service), you have to pay 'gaishniki' (traffic police), you have to pay 'chinovniki' (government officials) and you have to pay tamozhniya (border customs). And what is left? Almost nothing, only forest ticks to suck my blood, and these 'ticks' are sucking all my money.

The dangers and risks Andrey refers to when he was talking about 'these ticks', who were 'sucking the blood from his business' reflect the severe challenges encountered in efforts to trade and profit from *Saposhnikovia*:

1. '*To pay 'bandity' (criminals)*'. Many local rural communities became angry that strangers were invading their fields and forests and overusing their local resources. As this was happening during the 2020 national lockdown, some communities blocked roads to their villages to impose strict isolation and to stop strangers from coming and spreading the virus. However, often business interests prevailed, and some local young men, nicknamed *'kachki'* (bruisers), organised gangs in an attempt to control who entered 'their' territory to harvest the roots. Road gangs could throw special car traps made of iron nails to damage the wheels of the outsiders' vehicles. In other cases, road gangs tried to stop vehicles coming back from the fields, to ask for a share of the freshly dug roots. The argument *nado delit'sia* ('you should share') meant that root pickers had to give local gangsters a share of their daily diggings to avoid further complications.
2. '*To pay 'menty' (police)*'. According to Andrey, there were two types of police who could impose administrative fines on his hired root diggers. Traffic police *(gaishniki)* were quick to stop cars and buses with licence plates from other regions to check their reason for long-distance travel. Police could impose a penalty for 'breaking quarantine isolation' regulations. Other police forces were tasked with finding illegal migrants, and these forces could arrive at field camps in search of undocumented migrants from Central Asian states. Many Kyrgyz and Tajiks were hired in Siberian cities to dig roots in rural areas. With local markets and shops being closed during the pandemic, this group of migrants suffered most from unemployment and looked for any job opportunities around. After raiding field camps, police could arrest undocumented migrants for deportation and confiscate their root harvest. However, according to Andrey, it was still possible to negotiate with the traffic and 'illegal migration' police by offering them some amount in cash to avoid administrative fines and having his workers arrested. The most severe and uncompromising police force was the paramilitary units representing the Ministry of Emergencies and Disaster Relief (Russian abbreviation 'MChS').
3. '*To pay 'MChS' (emergencies service)*'. Summer 2020 was very hot, leading to an outbreak of forest fires, and the regional Ministry of Emergencies and Disaster Relief temporarily restricted people from going to forests and fields, suspecting that most forest fires were human-caused. People ignored the restrictions because they lived from nature through hunting

and fishing, collecting berries, cutting hay for livestock, etc. Thus, local MChS officials were tolerant of locals, whom they were often familiar with. But strangers became an easy target to accuse of spreading forest fires. Using helicopters, MChS monitored forests and could easily identify field camps, as dark holes from digging roots dotted the landscape. A local acquaintance described the scene as 'they [poachers] left the fields like after carpet bomb shelling'. Bribing MChS officials was difficult as they had better salaries and different local networks. Good connections with local MChS and police units meant one could obtain prior information about raids. Andrey's competitors could use their connections to push his business out of the Aginsky district.

4. *'To pay 'chinovniki' (government officials)'*. Very often, harvesting *Saposhnikovia* took place on leased pieces of land. A local branch of the Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resource Usage (*Rosprirodnadzor*) monitored territories where wild botanical collection required legal licensing. The lease was taxed depending on the size of the territory and harvesting was regulated. Playing with territorial quotas was profitable for some officers of the Federal Service. According to Andrey and Zhargal, obtaining 'the right' documents became the costliest stage of the business. Without lease agreements roots were considered to be illegally poached. Acquiring authorising documentation transformed roots into an exportable commodity. For example, Zhargal secured the roots he collected in the Aginsky district of the Transbaikal region by a licence issued in the neighbouring Buryat Republic, where *Saposhnikovia* did not grow well. Nevertheless, on paper, the barren fields of the different regions produced a gigantic amount of *Saposhnikovia* roots. The 'clean fake' documents (Reeves 2013: 508) made botanicals eligible for export to China.

5. *'To pay tamozhniya (border customs)'*. Border customs in the Transbaikal region and the Buryat Republic did not allow roots to cross into China because they are 'Red Listed' as threatened. However, in the Russian Far East, *Saposhnikovia* was not 'Red Listed'. As Zhargal explained, he and his Chinese partners 'found a window' at Blagoveshchensk. A friendly customs broker was helping them to 'push' their cargo through export customs clearance. This involved coordinating groups in Russia and China that needed to be paid. Moreover, in 2020, the Chinese borders were officially closed, and only the movement of goods was allowed.

Andrey's remarks provide a powerful commentary on the dark sides of the *Saposhnikovia* business and how much corruption occurred at each stage of its sourcing and commodification. Criminalisation of the business in botanicals

was caused not only by the ambiguity of *Saposhnikovia*'s 'uncertain' judicial status, but also by the fact that a national Law on Wild Botanicals was not yet applicable. Tracing *Saposhnikovia* roots 'from the field to the Russian-Chinese border' also demonstrated that each business stage involved various connections and networking, more bureaucratisation, and paperwork. The result was that, at the border crossing point, fictively documented roots had only partial or no relations to the places where they had been originally sourced.

Russia–China border encounters

Even before the border crossing, *Saposhnikovia's* roots became subject to the Chinese documentation regime. With the 'clear fake' documents issued by the local branches of the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment Protection, the cargo could only cross the Russian border. Having Russian export documents was insufficient for the cargo to cross the Chinese border. For this, the Chinese partners had to obtain a special licence allowing them to import wild botanicals. These sorts of licences are issued by the Chinese Ministry of Trade and Commerce and must be registered with the Chinese Customs service. The year 2020 was exceptionally bad for exporting wild botanicals to China, and it was not related to the outbreak of Covid in early 2020. In 2019, China started a campaign to clear its domestic market of fake food and vitamin supplement products. A new legislative framework introduced by Chinese regulatory bodies recognised imported herbal raw materials from wild botanicals as medical supplements, rather than food additives as they were before. This decision involved another level of bureaucracy, which affected the whole industry in China. Zhargal's Chinese partners found themselves in a difficult situation. As Zhargal explained, their cargo couldn't cross the China border for almost half a year whilst waiting for the right papers from the Chinese side. His warehouse in Ulan-Ude was fully packed with the roots collected during spring and summer seasons, and he had to temporarily stop sourcing *Saposhnikovia* roots from the countryside. But he still needed to pay rent for his warehouses and to hire lorries, which returned from Blagoveshchensk with undelivered cargo.

By the time his Chinese partners succeeded in obtaining all the documents needed for import, the pandemic was already spreading across the globe, and China introduced severe restrictions for crossing the border with Russia, only allowing Chinese citizens and unattended cargo to cross. Zhargal again escorted lorries loaded with the dried roots to Blagoveshchensk. To cross the Chinese border, Russian vehicle drivers had to be vaccinated and Covid-free, and double-checked again before entering the sanitation zone organised by the Chinese customs. Moreover, to avoid human transmission of the virus, Chinese customs introduced a new rule – to seal the vehicle cabins with drivers inside,

preventing them from leaving their vehicles whilst in the sanitation zone. As one of Zhargal's drivers shared in conversation with me, being locked inside his cabin, he had to relieve himself into plastic bottles and food containers inside the cabin, as well as to eat and to sleep in the cabin for days while the queue was slowly progressing through the sanitation zone. This experience was recalled by the driver as humorous, though with a bitter taste, suggesting viewing most of the pandemic measures as excessive and mostly absurd. As the driver continued, after passing through the sanitation zone, the cargo was offloaded, and drivers and their vehicles were allowed to return to Russia. When the cargo securely reached the Chinese side, it was loaded into Chinese vehicles and then escorted by Zhargal's Chinese partners to one of the pharmaceutical plants near Harbin in Heilongjiang Province. As an internet search revealed, in order to process the large amounts of imported herbal raw materials arriving from Russian Siberia and the Russian Far East, the Chinese industry was quick to establish the Suifenhe Free Trade Zone for processing medical herbs and to build '... the only cold storage plant in China to keep medical herb materials' (Wang, 2021) in proximity to the Russian border near Vladivostok. With limited information about its 'afterlife' on the Chinese side, tracing the *Saposhnikovia* roots' journey ends in China. Zhargal's Chinese partners were never in contact to provide more information. This is part of another story, which requires more investigation.

Transnational 'afterlife' of *Saposhnikovia* material

Here, reading the Chinese press and internet searching suggests that the roots would be processed once more and crushed into powder. They continue their journey either to domestic markets or to international destinations, but this time labelled as 'Made in China'. Several botanical commodities are exchanged in Shanghai, Hongkong and Macao. Specialists in the international trade in raw materials and formulations for traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) would send the refined *Saposhnikovia* root powder to global markets. Meanwhile, recent news in Chinese media builds a bigger picture. An online resource based in Hong Kong specialising in the botanical business reported about a great revival of the pharmacological industry in Heilongjiang province bordering Russia. A record amount of the herbal raw materials *produced in the province* (my emphasis) was traded by '173 small and medium pharmacological enterprises operating in 13 cities and 29 counties of the province during the Third Heilongjiang Traditional Chinese Medicine Expo in Harbin in September 2021' (Wang, 2021). This news revealed a mystery of the Chinese herbal market, that China's record domestic production growth in herbal raw materials was very much supported by imported wild medical herbs, including *Saposhnikovia* roots brought from Russian Siberia.

Moreover, a renewed 'National Medicinal Botanicals Programme (2018–2025)' sets out to reduce sourcing wild medical botanicals within Chinese territory and to increase outsourcing from other countries: '...at least 10% of medicinal plants must be imported from other countries' (Liu et al., 2019). In my interpretation, this programme envisages several tasks: (1) protecting national natural resources; (2) satisfying the growing domestic demand for herbal remedies due to the pandemic, based on the rising popularity of traditional Chinese medicine (Tindalle, 2023); and (3) maintaining China's position as one of the main global suppliers of key botanical ingredients (Armaghanian 2020), feeding the US and European booming herbal markets (McGuffin, 2023). All this is at the expense of the natural resources of the neighbouring Inner Asian countries, such as Mongolia and Russian Siberia.

Ironically, after being mixed with other 'China-sourced' botanical material in various herbal formulas, *Saposhnikovia* roots from Siberia and Mongolia are untraceable to their Inner Asian origin. This makes it difficult for international customers to understand the origin of the root extract, how fairly and ethically it was traded and sourced, where it was grown and what methods and technologies were used during the processing and cleaning processes to avoid contamination. One of the disruptive and destabilising elements in the roots trade, as this chapter reveals, is that the criminalisation and corruption attached to the sourcing of *Saposhnikovia* roots brings additional 'contamination' to the business of botanicals at large. Shadowy monetary transactions connected with bribing and false documents make the *Saposhnikovia* business even more obscure, nontransparent and corruption-prone.

Conclusion

Unlike other regions of the world that also experience environmental problems which are anthropogenic in nature (Chakrabarty, 2009: 213), Inner Asia is particularly vulnerable to ecological catastrophes and loss of biodiversity. Yet, as this story of resource extraction in the region has revealed, transborder botanical poachers discovered that the northern Asian wild forests and steppe had much to offer the regional and global pharmaceutical industry, and the search is primarily for wild botanicals that have higher value than farmed botanicals (Schippmann et al., 2002). The *Saposhnikovia* story outlined the complexities of sourcing wild herbal botanicals when production expands on an industrial scale to exhaust limited local resources. It takes years for devastated and emptied fields – whether they are in Inner Mongolia, Mongolia or Eastern Siberia – to recover after the '*Saposhnikovia* rush'. At the same time, I have tried to argue that the new pandemic-driven economic model of monetising *Saposhnikovia*

roots is not only damaging the local environment, but also brings an 'erosion' of social relations in local communities by criminalising local businesses, and introducing new corruption schemes and a loss of trust in state institutions (such as police, local government bodies, border customs). The depressing story of *Saposhnikovia* illustrates the ways in which the global pandemic has led to more intensive human-centric therapeutic exploitation of the wild plants and of Inner Asia's nature in general.

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PART III

Rural-Urban Dynamics: Networks, Perceptions and Economic Relations

❄ *Chapter 9* ❄

Reconstruction of Pastoral Management and Local Milk Supply in Suburban Areas in Mongolia

Takahiro Tomita

Introduction

In Mongolia's vast grasslands, sheep and goats graze peacefully. Produce from livestock includes dairy products in summer and meat in winter, which remain the country's staple foods. Nevertheless, Mongolia faces serious food security issues. For the period 2017–2019 one in five Mongolians (21.3 per cent) did not consume sufficient calories (FAO et al., 2020). The situation worsened from January 2020, with many people struggling with reduced incomes and higher food prices during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ariunaa et al., 2021). Food insecurity is more severe in urban areas than in rural areas. Among those who have migrated to Ulaanbaatar and secondary cities for economic opportunities, many are employed in seasonal and temporary jobs and are more vulnerable to market shocks because of their dependence on the food market.

Factors behind this food insecurity include the rapid increase in urban population, collapse and transformation of the food supply chain, and dependence on imported food. First, after World War II, industrialisation led to an increase in Mongolia's urban population, particularly in Ulaanbaatar. The urban population exceeded the rural population by the end of the 1970s, and is now more than double the rural. This imbalance has a major impact on food supply and demand. Second, the collapse of the state procurement system following the privatisation of state enterprises and pastoral cooperatives in the 1990s resulted in a significant reduction in the processing and marketing of food products through industrial production methods. Today, much of the supply of meat and dairy products is based on local relationships. Market channels connecting small and medium-sized herding households with food processors remain to be established, and livestock products are mainly traded in informal markets (Goodland, 2010). Third, while Mongolia is almost self-sufficient domestically in terms of meat, milk, wheat and potatoes, it relies on imports for many other

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food products, such as rice, vegetables and processed foods. As a landlocked country with an underdeveloped road network and high transportation costs, the country is vulnerable to global economic changes such as inflation following the Covid-19 pandemic. However, from a long-term perspective, food insecurity has been caused by social and economic changes since the transition to a market economy in the early 1990s and, more broadly, by urbanisation and industrialisation since the mid-twentieth century.

In 2020, the Mongolian Parliament approved Vision 2050, a long-term development policy guideline for the country. It emphasises the promotion of the pastoral sector and rural development for poverty reduction and economic growth, while reducing the risks of environmental change and the destruction of ecosystems. Although the share of agriculture in gross domestic product (GDP) has been declining, a quarter of those employed are still engaged in agriculture. Therefore, agriculture, especially pastoralism, has the potential to reduce rural poverty and diversify economic growth through food production and exports of livestock products (ADB, 2021). To address food insecurity and global food and fertiliser price rises, Parliament ratified a resolution on 17 June 2022, including the following measures: promoting export-oriented food production and increasing food production to reduce dependency on imported food; improving standards, quality controls, innovation in food production, storage and transportation; increasing domestic supply of fodder and forage; promoting irrigated agriculture production; improving livestock sanitary conditions; improving pastureland management and trade; and developing agro-industrial parks for establishing cluster-based agricultural value chains (*Mongol Ulsyn Ikh Khural*, 2022). These government policies prioritise the supply of both high-quality and safe food to domestic urban consumers, while aiming to gradually transition to a quality-driven pastoral sector for export markets. Currently, various issues for sustainable development of the livestock industry, such as responding to climate change, improving the economic efficiency of pastoral production and improving livestock feed, reproduction and health, are being addressed with the support of international donors, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Strengthening the food supply chain is considered one of the keys to ensuring food security. Governments and development agencies believe that the dominance of informal marketing systems, particularly for livestock, makes it difficult to achieve quality-differentiated prices and acceptable animal traceability, health inspections and registration. They emphasise the need for formal market institutions that enable the domestic supply of safe and high-quality food at fair and transparent prices (JICA, 2017; ADB, 2023). For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, a weak logistical and storage network was

reportedly a constraint for many local communities in connecting to markets, causing a disruption in the food supply (ADB, 2020). This argument is correct in one respect. Such a cluster approach, which integrates the procurement and transportation of livestock products with the improvement of food processing, would certainly contribute to improving the quality of raw materials, controlling livestock diseases, and providing a safe and secure food supply to urban areas. However, the current development discourse on food security ignores the contribution of informal marketing systems for meat and dairy products. Food security essentially refers to accessibility to basic foods that people need at all times (Pottier, 1999). Hence it would be incorrect to regard the direct trade of livestock products between herders and urban residents as problematic. This chapter examines the characteristics and sustainability of local dairy supply chains in the suburban areas of Mongolia to reconsider food security issues from a bottom-up perspective, including herders and urban dwellers.

Immediately after the transition to a market economy in the early 1990s, people who had lost their jobs due to the dismantling of state enterprises moved from cities and provincial centres to grasslands and began raising livestock as a return to a traditional way of life. It was assumed that households with a small number of livestock acquired through privatisation would raise livestock exclusively for home consumption (Matsubara, 1998; Humphrey and Sneath, 1999). However, today, herders' livestock rearing and use are strongly linked to and influenced by the global market. In particular, the physical distance from markets (cities, borders, etc.) has a significant impact on the economic activities of herders, with a divide in pastoral strategies between suburban and remote areas (Ozaki, 2019).

To understand the differences between pastoral management in remote and suburban areas, this chapter focuses on the use of milk and dairy products. It is difficult to preserve the freshness of dairy products and, in remote areas, they are mainly used for home consumption or as gifts. In suburban areas, however, the sale of milk, its processed products, and *airag* (fermented horse milk) provides a cash income source for some herders. In the suburbs of Erdenet, where I conducted research for many years, the sale of dairy products in the food market has expanded since the 2000s, due not only to herders' desire for income, but also the growing health consciousness and changing food preferences of urban dwellers. However, the production and distribution of milk and dairy products by herders in suburban areas remain unclear.

Therefore, this chapter examines the social and economic background of the expansion of small-scale dairy production in suburban areas, based on the case of Erdenet, the second-largest city in Mongolia, and the neighbouring *soums* of Bulgan Province. The chapter asks: how do smallholder dairy produc-

tion and marketing systems operate? Do they contribute to food safety and a secure food supply?

Milk utilisation and its transformation in Mongolia

Pastoralists in Mongolia keep five types of livestock: sheep, goats, cattle, horses and camels. Although there are differences in the combination of livestock species depending on the ecological conditions of each region, they share the same characteristics of multiple uses for various types of livestock (Konagaya, 1996). Production of food (meat and dairy products) from livestock follows a seasonal plan (Kazato, 2020). The milking period usually starts in early summer after females have given birth, and continues through autumn to winter. In the summer, a wide variety of dairy products are produced because of the abundance of milk. In winter, people mainly eat meat, slaughtering a proportion of the increased stock, as well as a small amount of preserved dairy products. The seasonal separation of these foods allows for greater food availability. In addition, grains and tea have long been a part of the Mongolian diet through trade with China.

After World War II (especially during the collective period), pastoral production for domestic and foreign urban consumers expanded rapidly and pastoralism became a major industry in Mongolia. The socialist industrialisation of pastoralism has had a significant impact on livestock raising and product use. Previously, dairy products were mainly consumed within households or local communities (Ozaki and Morinaga, 2016). Based on previous studies, the following four changes in milk utilisation from the early twentieth century to the present can be highlighted. First, cows became the main milking target. Although sheep, goats, cows, horses and camels are all milked in Mongolia, the importance of cows as milking targets increased with the construction of the dairy industry during the socialist era (Konagaya, 2005). Second, milk-processing methods have become simpler. This is thought to be due to the change in the milking target to high-yielding dairy cows, which require the processing of large quantities of milk, and the relative decline in the position of dairy products as a form of preserved food (Konagaya, 2005). Third, the complementary consumption of meat and dairy products, which has contributed to the stability of rural diets, is collapsing. External factors, such as the spread of foreign foods and the pension system, have made people more dependent on buying food products in the market (Hirata, 2012). Fourth, dairy products have been commercialised.

The state procurement of milk, meat and cashmere began in Mongolia in the early 1940s. Most of the procured milk was processed into butter and

exported to the Soviet Union. After World War II, the urban population grew rapidly, especially in Ulaanbaatar, and a variety of dairy products, other than butter, were produced to meet the food demands of urban residents. After the collectivisation of the agro-pastoral industry was completed in the 1960s, milk production was handled by state farms and pastoral cooperatives. State farms were dairy farms where crossbred and purebred cows were kept in barns (some were mechanised with milking machines and tractors) and raw milk was supplied to dairy processing factories in the capital or secondary cities. However, in pastoral cooperatives, native breeds of cattle were raised on natural pastures, except during severe cold periods, and milking, milk processing and marketing of milk were handled by the cooperative. Non-traditional products (butter and casein) were produced on a large scale using Soviet-made machinery. However, when state farms and pastoral cooperatives were dismantled during the transition to a market economy in the early 1990s, the dairy industry, which was centred on butter production for Soviet and domestic urban consumers, rapidly declined.

The dismantling of transportation, storage and processing facilities had a long-lasting impact, and dairy production through industrial manufacturing methods was seriously depressed from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. Following agro-pastoral promotion measures after the 2008 global food price crisis, dairy production through industrial manufacturing methods gradually recovered, and by 2012 it exceeded the level it had reached in 1989 near the end of the socialist era (Figure 9.1). However, according to Damdinsuren (2014), domestic factory production of dairy products in 2012 accounted for only 10.7% (42.7 million litres) of annual milk consumption (391.6 million litres), while a larger amount, 14.4% (56.4 million litres), was imported from abroad;[1] approximately 75% of total annual milk and dairy consumption was produced by herders and small dairy farms. As of 2021, the amount of industrial dairy production has increased significantly to 152.5 million litres, but still accounts for only 45.9% of annual milk consumption (330.9 million litres). That is, 'informal' dairy production in rural areas still accounts for nearly half of the total dairy production. Dairy products produced by individuals and small dairy farmers have not been studied sufficiently because it is difficult to get firm figures for this sort of trade.

1. Damdinsuren's (2014) figure of 42.7 million litres contrasts with the National Statistics Office's (72.4 million litres) estimate of the value of industrial dairy production in 2012. However, even when calculated using estimates from the National Statistics Office, the rate of annual milk consumption accounted for by factory-based dairy production was only approximately 18.3% of the total.

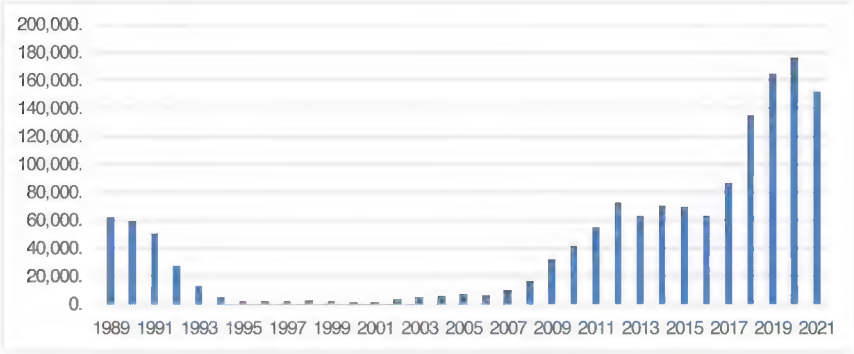

Figure 9.1: Dairy production through industrial manufacturing method, 1989–2021. Unit: one thousand litres.

In the following section, we examine how small-scale dairy products are produced and sold to urban consumers, using examples from the city and its neighbouring areas.

Methods and study sites

The case study was conducted in three different *soums* (counties) in Bulgan Province, neighbouring Erdenet, the second largest city in Mongolia. The city grew following the discovery of a large deposit of copper and molybdenum in the mid-twentieth century, and the development of mining at the site in the 1970s. Due to these developments, Erdenet has become the economic and population centre of the northern region of the country.

The manufacturing and marketing of dairy products are affected by distance from markets. Therefore, the study sites were selected to be at different distances from Erdenet: one in Orkhon *soum* second *bag* (subdistrict) (20 kilometres), one in Selenge *soum* fifth *bag* (70 kilometres), and one in Teshig *soum* second *bag* (280 kilometres). The author visited the study sites intermittently from 2010 to 2017, conducting fieldwork using semi-structured interviews and participant observation with 97 herding households (61 in Orkhon *soum*, 22 in Selenge *soum* and 14 in Teshig *soum*) (Table 9.1). A follow-up survey to determine the social and economic status of herders since the Covid-19 pandemic was conducted in 2022 for some households in Selenge and Orkhon *soums*.

Table 9.1: Number of households surveyed, and households engaged in dairy product sales.

	Total number of households*	Livestock Owner*	Households surveyed	Dairy product sales	Date of the survey
Orkhon *soum* 2nd *bag*	186	149	61	43	2010, 2011, 2017, 2022
Selenge *soum* 5th *bag*	330	114	22	15	2012, 2014, 2022
Teshig *soum* 2nd *bag*	234	192	14	12	2017

* Total number of households and livestock-owning households refer to the basic livestock registers for Orkhon (2013), Selenge (2013), and Teshig (2017) *soums*.

Bulgan Province is located on the northern side of the Khangai Mountains. The southern part of the province is an arid steppe area, whereas the northern part is a relatively wet forested steppe area. All three *soums* selected as study sites are located in the forested steppe area (*khangai*), and there were no significant differences in their ecological backgrounds. Cows were the main targets of milking at the study sites. Cows are milked for longer than other livestock species, usually from May to November. The highest lactation period is from July to September, when they are on summer pastures and dairy production is at its peak. Therefore, interviews with herders at the study sites were conducted as much as possible during their stays in the summer and autumn camps.

To obtain a complete picture of the local dairy supply chain, store owners and brokers who deal in dairy products in the food market in Erdenet and at a road service area on the main road running north–south through Bulgan province were also interviewed, as well as the owner and employees of a dairy processing factory. However, this study focuses on analysis of the supply side, and lacks a survey and analysis of urban populations on the demand side. Examining the changes in dairy product consumption and food consciousness in urban areas is an issue for future research.

Regional deviations in dairy production

Demand for and sales of dairy products in Erdenet

According to the herders interviewed, sales of dairy products such as cream and dried cheese have expanded in the local food market in Erdenet since the mid-2000s. A herder in her mid-forties in Selenge *soum* recalled that when she got married in the mid-1990s, the food market did not handle dairy products and

would hardly buy them because of their susceptibility to damage. This herding household began selling dairy products in earnest between 2004 and 2005. Interviews with herders suggest that the demand for dairy products has increased in Erdenet because of the rise in the urban population since the 2000s and the growing food safety and health consciousness of urban dwellers.

As shown in Figure 9.2, there are various sales channel patterns for milk and dairy products, from rural to urban areas. The most popular methods are direct sales by herders to urban residents through social media, introductions by acquaintances, and sales to small store owners (brokers) who deal with dairy products in food markets. Recently, some herders and dairy farmers have been supplying raw milk to urban dairy factories (This relatively small-scale industrial manufacturing method for dairy production is discussed in the next section).

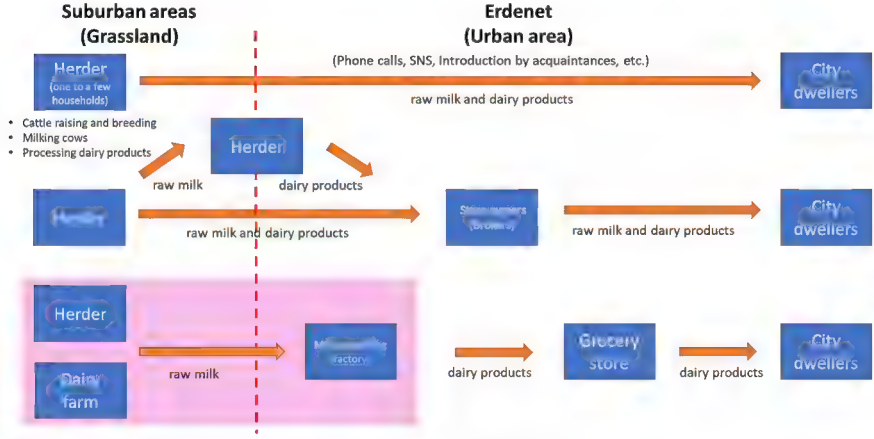

Figure 9.2: Sales channels for milk and dairy products.

The following discussion focuses primarily on transactions between herders and dairy stores. The main destination for their sales was the Khuleg food market in Erdenet. Within this food market, there are two areas with small stores specialising in dairy products. Most store owners are women. Herders bring their milk and dairy products to store owners by private transport or shared cabs, paying the cost of transport. Herders and store owners agree on a price. Herders usually continue to do business with the same store owner (broker), they trust, which saves time.

Production and sales of dairy products by herders

Herding households with only a few to a dozen milkable cows would have limited daily milk availability. All interviewed households used milk for home consumption and for serving and giving to guests. However, the sale of raw milk and dairy products depends on the household type. In *bag* centres where there are more pensioners and people who have jobs other than pastoralism, milk is used entirely for home consumption and for serving and gifting guests. In contrast, most people who raised livestock full-time sold their milk and dairy products. However, there were differences among the three *soums* of Bulgan Province regarding the products sold, and the volume and frequency of transactions.

From Selenge *soum* to the food market in Erdenet is a two-hour car ride on rough, bumpy roads. The market price of milk drops during the summer when milking is at its peak, and it is difficult to profit from the sale of raw milk alone, considering transportation costs. Therefore, herders process raw milk into dairy products with long preservation periods and higher prices, and sell these products at Erdenet once a week or once every two weeks. The main dairy products sold were *tsötsgii* (sour cream separated from milk) and *aaruul* (a type of hard, dried cheese), prepared by heating and dehydrating skimmed milk. In Mongolia, *öröm* (cream) is commonly prepared by heating and dehydrating raw milk in large pots. However, over the past ten years, the method of extracting cream from raw milk using a manual separator has become popular in this region.

In Selenge *soum*, eleven of the fifteen households selling dairy products selected the cream separator method (the other two were dairy farmers selling milk to dairy processing factories). The defatting process using the cream separator enabled the extraction of large amounts of cream in a short time. The method using a large pot limits the amount of cream that can be extracted at one time and requires time and labour to produce it and to remove foreign substances. However, the cream produced by the separator method was considered to have an inferior flavour compared to the large pot method because the fat content in skimmed milk after cream extraction is less than that of the large pot method. For this reason, some households produce dairy products for sale using the cream separator method, but use the large pot method for home consumption, and for serving or gifting guests. Furthermore, when making *aaruul* from skimmed milk in this region, some households reduce the degree of lactic acid fermentation to reduce acidity and add sugar to increase market acceptability.

Milk is also processed into dairy products for sale in Teshig *soum*. However, because it takes more than half a day to reach neighbouring cities from distant Teshig *soum* and transportation costs are high, dairy products are sold only once or a few times a year in Erdenet and the centre of Bulgan province. In summer, when milk production is at its peak, the market price of dairy products

is lower, so herders do not sell their dairy products in distant cities, but only to familiar residents in the centre of the *soum* and to brokers who occasionally visit the area. Because there are no modern preservation and processing facilities in Teshig *soum*, *tsötsgii* are churned, dehydrated, and mixed with salt to make *maslo* (butter), which can be stored for a long time. The *maslo* is packed in sheep stomachs, beer cans or plastic bags, and stored in underground storage bunkers or in the freezer of a private home in the *soum* centre. Thus, the herders in Teshig have used considerable ingenuity in processing and storing dairy products, to counter the remoteness of their area.

In contrast, Orkhon *soum* differs significantly from the other two *soums* in that herders sell raw milk and *tarag* (yoghurt), which are processed without changing their properties. Milk and *tarag* do not keep well in the heat and are cheaper per kilogram than cream and *aaruul*. In Orkhon *soum*, herders' summer camps are close to the food market in Erdenet, and they can sell milk and *tarag* without incurring transportation costs, so they can expect to make a sufficient profit. In addition, saving the time and labour required for milk processing is attractive to busy herders. In addition to cow's milk, *airag*, made by fermenting horse milk, and goat's milk are also sold in Orkhon *soum* (Figure 9.3).

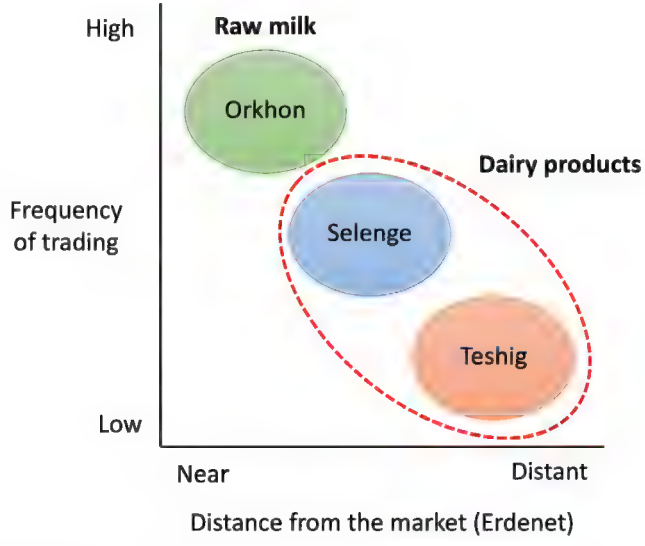

Figure 9.3: Relationship between distance from the market and frequency of trading.

Factors contributing to regional deviations

There are two possible reasons for the regional differences in the types of dairy products sold, and the volume and frequency of transactions. The first is distance from the market (Erdenet). In Selenge and Teshig *soums*, it is difficult to profit from raw milk sales alone, because of the high transportation costs. It is better to adopt bulk sales of dairy products which keep well and command high prices. The traditional wisdom of processing and preserving milk in the summer, when milking is at its peak, to overcome winter shortages has been used to solve the current problems of the preservation and transportation of dairy products for sale. Of course, it is possible to use similar means for Orkhon *soum*. However, Orkhon *soum*, which is very close to the food market in Erdenet, could probably make a considerable profit from the sale of cow's milk and *airag* owing to the reduced time and transportation costs.

The second is the size and composition of the livestock owned by herding households. Based on the self-reports of the interviewed herders, the share of dairy products in the total income from the sale of livestock products was surprisingly higher in the more distant Selenge *soum* than in the more suburban Orkhon *soum*. This indicates that, although distance from the market is a disadvantage for dairy product sales, it does not necessarily mean that income from dairy products is lower. In Orkhon *soum*, where the number of livestock owned per household is higher than in Selenge *soum* (average 317 head in 2013 as compared to 93 head), it would be possible for herders with a few hundred head of livestock to sustain themselves only by consuming and selling livestock, which naturally increase over the year. Some feel that the processing and selling of dairy products is a limitation on increasing the size of herds because of restrictions on when and where they can relocate and the availability of labour. The circumstances of each family – such as whether they have other income sources and whether they have school-aged children – also affect their decisions to trade in dairy products. As described above, herders in the three *soums* of Bulgan Province, which is broadly considered a suburban area, have restructured small-scale and informal dairy production in ways that are adapted to the local environment and social and economic conditions, considering the size and composition of their herds, as well as the amount of available land and labour to raise livestock, in addition to the distances from the market.

Takahiro Tomita

The importance of dairy production to the pastoral economy in suburban areas

General characteristics of dairy production

Apart from a few cases, herders' pastoral management is not dedicated to dairy production. Milk and dairy products are one of the economic bases on which they depend, along with meat, cashmere, and other livestock products. While dairy farming industries in Europe and Japan promote the differentiation of tasks for greater efficiency, individual herding households in the study area are responsible for everything, from cattle raising and milking to the processing and marketing of dairy products. In addition to cattle, herders raise a variety of other livestock, such as sheep, goats and horses at the same time and suffer from a serious shortage of labour. Nevertheless, herders continue to produce dairy products with limited labour and spare time. This is because it is important for them not only to obtain food and income but also to maintain and reproduce social relations, such as hosting guests and giving gifts to relatives and acquaintances (Ahearn, 2021). Interestingly, gifts to relatives and acquaintances often take priority over sales in the market. Moreover, this was not only a spontaneous action by herders, but was sometimes done at the request of their relatives and acquaintances. For example, in an interview with Odonchimeg on 1 August 2024 in Selenge *soum*, she explained:

> I always sell dairy products to a store owner lady at the Khuleg food market in Erdenet. On July 18, I took ten kilograms of *tsötsgii* to sell, but the price had dropped to 3,500 *tugrik* per kilogram. So, I only sold two kilograms to make some money for my immediate needs, and gave the rest to my brothers who live nearby.

Thus, it is reasonable to say that, at least in the study sites, herders sell milk and dairy products which are surplus to their own consumption and what is required for serving and giving gifts. Some households that are highly dependent on the sale of dairy products may curtail the use of milk for serving and giving gifts; however, this is probably a minority of households. However, this does not mean that the sale of milk and milk products should be regarded as insignificant for each type of pastoral management. Next, we considered the economic significance of dairy product sales to herders in suburban areas.

Economic significance of dairy products

Livestock, which is both property and daily subsistence for herders, is at the centre of the pastoral economy. A large portion of their income also stems from the sale of meat. Households with more livestock can afford both to consume more

themselves and to sell more. A comparison of the annual number of livestock consumed by livestock-owning households in Orkhon *soum* and Selenge *soum* (the sum of the number consumed by households themselves and the number sold in 2012/13) shows that more households in Orkhon *soum* consume more livestock annually, and that most of these are sold.

Focusing on the annual livestock balance (the number of fertile females minus the number of livestock consumed and sold), it was found that, at all study sites, herders usually consumed or sold as much of their livestock as was compatible with maintaining the size of their herds (Figure 9.4). Many herders are more interested in increasing their herds than in selling their livestock to gain more cash profit. This strategy of maximising livestock numbers is considered a preparation for potential risks such as disasters and infectious diseases, as well as the economic benefits of increasing livestock in the face of declining money values due to inflation and limited markets where livestock can be sold at a fair price.

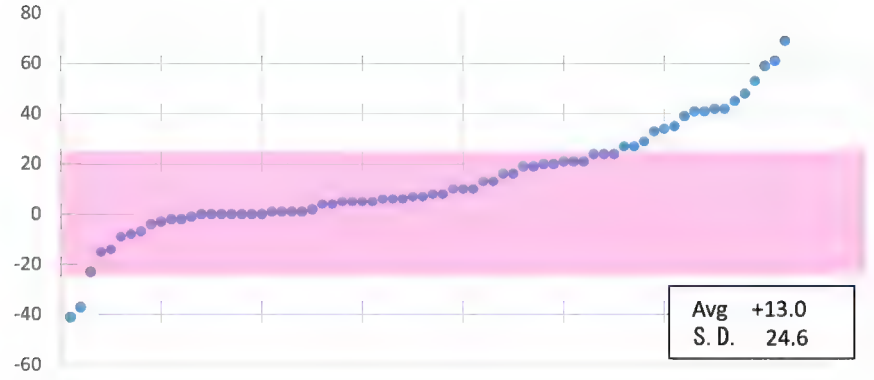

Figure 9.4: Annual net change in livestock numbers for each household with fewer than 150 head of livestock between 2012 and 2013, calculated as natural increase minus consumption (i.e. slaughter and sales). The sample represents 72 of the 87 households that owned livestock for at least three years (2012–2014) in Selenge soum, 5th bag.

Herders' strategy of reducing livestock sales as much as possible is supported by selling cashmere and dairy products (Ozaki, 2003; Marin, 2008), which do not reduce the size of their herds. However, cashmere, combed from the winter undercoat of goats, is sold only in spring, and dairy products in summer and autumn. Of these, dairy products sell for less than cashmere; however, as confirmed in the previous section, herders can increase their revenue through creativity and ingenuity. In both Selenge and Teshig *soum*, the essential charac-

teristic of dairy processing – preservability – was applied to address the issues created by the dismantling of public storage and transportation systems at the end of the socialist era. Some herders also tried to earn more income by selling preserved dairy products in bulk in winter and spring (the milk off-season), when the amount of milk available in the market was greatly reduced.

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic seriously impacted the trade in livestock and livestock products in suburban areas. Lockdowns were implemented intermittently during 2020–21. Checkpoints were set up at city and county boundaries, restricting the free movement of people and goods. In the ensuing downturn, unemployment and the cost of food both increased (ADB, 2020). 'Large livestock such as cattle and horses were difficult to find an individual customer for, so we had to sell them to brokers, despite the low selling price', a herder in Orkhon *soum* recalls. Despite relatively minor restrictions on movement during the summer months, when dairy product sales peaked, some herders avoided selling in crowded markets and sold only to close relatives and acquaintances. Although trade in livestock and livestock products thus declined during the pandemic, limiting opportunities for cash income, it had recovered to pre-Covid-19 levels by the time of the survey in the summer of 2022.

New trends and challenges: Rest area, dairy company

In addition to the direct trade between grasslands (herders) and cities (markets and residents), there have been new trends in local dairy supply chains in recent years.

Rest areas along the main road

There is a mountain pass called '*Tülüügiin davaa*' located 45 kilometres north of the centre of Bulgan province, on the road to Khövsgöl province. Since the mid-1990s, nearby herders have gathered here to sell fruit and dairy products, leading to the construction of a restaurant and hotel, and the formation of a rest area. More drivers and tourists have been visiting the area since the construction of parking lots, walking trails and resting facilities with government funds in 2020. Approximately ten small stores selling *airag* and various dairy products conduct business from May to October each year. Recently, herders from not only neighbouring but also distant regions have been visiting this area to sell their dairy products.

Dairy company in Bulgan city

The first private dairy company was established in the centre of Bulgan Province in 2020. This company purchases milk from neighbouring herders, processes it into dairy products and sells them. It has two milk collection trucks, which go to purchase milk from Bulgan and Selenge *soums* almost every day during the peak season from June to September. From June to the end of August, the milk is processed into *maslo* and *aarts* (curdled milk) at a factory. These products are not sold immediately but are stored in the factory's freezers. From September onwards, the stored dairy products are weighed, packaged and boxed for sale during the cold season, when market prices rise. Simultaneously, they produce *shar tos* (butter oil), *aaruul* and other dairy products from *maslo* and *aarts* made in the summer. These products are sold through stores in Ulaanbaatar, Erdenet and Bulgan as well as through social media.

Such restructuring of the distribution of dairy products and dairy production through industrial manufacturing methods in places other than major cities may cause changes in the way herders produce and sell dairy products. It is not possible to determine whether these recent trends will expand further in the future. However, it is not necessary to consider these new trends and challenges as phenomena separate from those of informal dairy production by herders. For example, the management strategy of the dairy company in Bulgan, based on the seasonality of milk production, is thought to be more in line with dairy production by herders in Teshig *soum* than that of the large dairy companies in Ulaanbaatar.

Discussion and conclusion

Since the 2000s, small-scale manufacturing and marketing of dairy products, mainly by individual suburban families, has helped meet the growing food demand in urban areas and the increasing health consciousness of city dwellers, while also diversifying the income sources of herder households, thereby revitalising local economies and utilising local resources. However, the local dairy supply chains in suburban areas are unstable. In the following sections, we examine the recent situation faced by herding households that supply dairy products, including their declining labour force, changing management strategies and the impact of infectious diseases.

Takahiro Tomita

Shrinking residential units and pastoral management: Dependence on school-aged children's labour

The basic unit of a pastoral society, *khot ail* in Mongolian, consists of two or more households, in which pastoral work, such as day grazing and milking, is carried out together. The size of the group fluctuates (Goto, 1968; Humphrey and Sneath, 1999), and group members tend to gather in the summer and disperse in the winter (Konagaya, 1996). By tracing detailed changes in the residential units of herders in Khentii Province over a period of eleven years, Karashima (2016) found a shrinking number of households comprising residential units and the households themselves, such as the separate living of husbands and wives and their children in the grasslands and settlement areas. In most of the herding households interviewed by the author, pastoral work was carried out by husbands and wives (and in some cases, husbands alone) for almost the entire year. Along with the usual livestock grazing and housework, milking and milk processing must be performed during the summer and autumn months, which are the busiest times of the year, as well as during the spring livestock birthing season. In households with school-aged children, the children commonly live with relatives or acquaintances to attend school in the centre of the province or in Erdenet, but return home during the summer (June–August) and winter (January–February) vacations to help their parents with their work. Children are regarded as a valuable labour force, especially in herding households where the size of the herd is small, and it is difficult to hire herders from outside the household. For example, when the new school year begins, some herding households leave their herds with other households, reduce the frequency of milking and stop selling dairy products on the food market. Thus, for a small family, pastoralist management depends on the labour of school-aged children to sustain busy summer pastoral work (milking and milk processing). It is unclear whether they will continue producing and selling dairy products at the same scale when their children move to distant cities for employment or higher education. In addition, making money for childcare and education motivates households with school-aged children to engage in physically demanding dairy product sales. As children become financially independent, their incentive to continue dairy product sales may weaken.

Shift to cattle-oriented livestock raising

The shrinking of residential units has also led to changes in how herders raise their livestock. Although the number of cases was limited, six of the eight herding households in Selenge *soum* (followed up in 2022) sold their sheep and goats (three households) or left them with other households (three households)

and kept only cattle and horses. They gave up their sheep and goats because of the difficulty of daily grazing. A herd of sheep and goats must be followed by a herder on a horse or motorcycle. Otherwise, the herd may become scattered or, in the worst case, mixed with other herds. In contrast, cattle herds only need to be brought back to the campsite in the evening after being released into pasture in the morning. Furthermore, although cattle reproduction is slower than that of sheep and goats, cattle are more profitable in terms of milk and meat availability. This transition from small to large livestock can be regarded as a pattern of suburban pastoral management, as indicated by Ozaki (2019). However, in Orkhon and Teshig *soums*, the transition to cattle-oriented pastoral management was not observed at this time. This suggests that suburban management is selected in Selenge *soum* because of a combination of distance from urban areas, the geographical condition of being in a forested mountain valley (limited grazing land), and social factors such as an increase in grazing pressure due to an increase in the number of livestock.

Is the transition to cattle-oriented pastoral management advantageous for the local milk supply chain? Undoubtedly, an increase in the number of cows increased milk production. However, the market-oriented type of pastoral management, which specialises in a particular species of livestock, is more economically efficient than the 'multiple cropping' (Konagaya, 2007) or the subsistence type (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999), which uses various species of livestock, including both sexes, for multiple purposes; but it is more affected by climatic and environmental changes. Cattle are particularly vulnerable to heavy snowfall and foot-and-mouth disease, and each household must prepare a large amount of hay for the severely cold season, which becomes a time and economic burden.

Reproduction of livestock and milk use in crisis situations

Natural disasters and infectious diseases also have significant impacts on herders' milk use. In 2021–2022, an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) was reported across a large area of the country, including Bulgan Province. FMD is highly contagious and, because there is no effective treatment, most countries kill all infected animals to prevent the spread. Mongolia also has a guideline that, in principle, livestock diagnosed with FMD infection must be killed (*Mal Emnelgiin Erönkhii Gazar*, 2019); however, this has not been adequately implemented owing to a lack of veterinarians and public facilities (Medee.MN, 2022). In practice, most measures are symptomatic, such as restricting the migration of people and livestock from infected areas and prescribing antibiotics to livestock.

With the spread of FMD, several households in Selenge *soum* chose to reduce the number and amount of milking per day compared with normal years,

prioritising the growth of calves and protection of mother cows. At the time of the summer 2014 survey, all households managed to separate cows and calves except when milking, as they milked twice a day, morning and evening. In the summer of 2022, cows and calves were separated only at night, and were released together for grazing after early morning milking. In addition, the amount of milk per cow was reduced to less than half of the normal year's milk per cow to maintain the nutritional status of the calves. Herders prioritised the pregnancy and delivery of the mother cow and the growth of the calf and discouraged excessive milk use to reduce the risk of FMD infection. In other words, there is a trade-off between increasing the number of livestock and increasing dairy production. This trade-off between meat and milk use is often apparent not only during FMD outbreaks but also during critical herd survival situations, such as drought, severe winter disasters, and milking during cold seasons (Tomita, 2020). At the time of the study, there were no significant changes in the purchase and sale of dairy products in the food market. However, FMD can be seen as a potential risk factor for reduced dairy supply and higher prices. The Covid-19 pandemic also posed a risk to dairy production in suburban areas. In this case, however, the trade-off between meat and dairy products was not apparent, as the overall livestock trade shrank due to distribution disruptions caused by movement restrictions, such as prohibitions on outings and travelling outside the city, and economic deterioration as urban markets cooled.

As described above, the local milk supply chain in suburban areas has an individual and situation-dependent character formed by the complex interplay of interests between herding households and urban residents, and will continue to change flexibly in response to ecological conditions and social and economic circumstances. Therefore, from the perspective of production scale and stability, it is difficult for smallholder dairy producers to meet the food demands of a rapidly growing urban population. In this sense, the development policy of restructuring the food supply chain on which governments and international organisations are working is appropriate and has great social and economic significance. However, major supply chains led by the large food industry cannot replace all the roles played by local supply chains. In small-scale dairy production in suburban areas, gifts and sales to relatives and acquaintances are inextricably linked and maintained through a widespread cooperative relationship between the steppes and urban areas. In other words, it is necessary to carefully consider the challenges and what is needed to achieve sustainable livelihoods (wellbeing) from both the steppe and urban perspectives, rather than a simple choice between two options, such as whether to adopt a formal or informal food system.

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❄ *Chapter 10* ❄

Hybridity and Vitality of Culture: Mongolian Traditional Performing Arts During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

Akira Kamimura

Introduction

On 28 January 2020, I arrived in Ulaanbaatar from Beijing. It was quiet, with no Covid-19 bans or tests. After the plane landed at Chinggis Khaan International Airport, a dozen Mongolian inspectors wearing protective suits boarded the plane and took the temperature of the passengers. The previous day, the government of Mongolia had adopted 'Resolution No. 30' about measures to control the new coronavirus. This closed all the schools and other facilities, including museums, libraries, event venues, restaurants and bars. Three days later, on 1 February, the government prohibited foreign citizens from entering Mongolia from China and, on 23 March, all regular international flights and trains were cancelled. Thus, I came to stay in Mongolia until December 2020.

The government's anti-Covid measures affected Mongolian traditional customary life. Before Tsagaan Sar (White Lunar New Year) in February, the government conducted an extensive campaign urging citizens to refrain from visiting each other and encouraging the traditional Tsagaan Sar greetings to be held electronically, which they referred to as *tsakhim zolgolt* on social media. During the New Year festival, the government prohibited public celebrations and travel between provinces and the capital. Eventually, summer came. The 2020 National Naadam festival differed from previous years. The government broadcast a pre-recorded video clip on television instead of a live performance of the opening ceremony at the National Sports Stadium. The performances in the video clip impressed people much more than the previous live ceremonies and positively changed attitudes toward the traditional performing arts. This virtual opening ceremony on TV (also referred to as *tsakhim neelt*) led to a series of dance challenges, inspiring many Mongolians in the country and abroad to perform traditional ethnic dances and post the clips on social media. I call this

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the 'Dance Chance' challenge phenomenon, after the name of the contest on social media. The Covid-19 pandemic changed how Mongolian people perceive and practise traditional performing arts.

Traditional performing arts are part of Mongolian national identity. These include the telling of epics, throat singing and playing the horse-head fiddle, the *Morin khuur*. During the process of building a nation-state in the socialist era (1924–1992), traditional performing arts were established as an integral part of the new socialist national culture, resulting in a hybrid of European and Mongolian traditions. Kamimura (2001) discusses epic telling and Mongolian *khöömii* (throat singing), as well as Marsh (2009), the horsehead fiddle, and Shimamura (2017), the Mongolian traditional costume, *deel*, illustrating the hybridity of modern Mongolian culture. 'Hybridity' refers to the nature and degree to which cultural items are apt to be combined with external elements to produce hybrids. 'Vitality' is the ability to survive or remain vigorous. My research in Mongolia suggests a high positive correlation between hybridity and vitality, though one must not ignore the possibility that hybridity may not be a positive (Kraidy, 2005: 6).

As a point of comparison, in Japan, some local festivals with a long history are disappearing due to declining participation and a shrinking, aging population, particularly in rural areas. The recent Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the pace of change in this process. For example, the 'Sominsai' festival's thousand-year history at Kokuseki-ji Temple, Iwate Prefecture, ended in February 2024. In the festival's main event, men in loincloths vie and struggle for wooden charms. Curiosity in this as a 'naked festival' attracted a vast number of spectators. Residents, devout Buddhists, lead a life in strict discipline for days before the event. They thought introducing outsiders would jeopardise the purity of the tradition, so they ended the festival. However, other festivals have undergone minor changes and continue with outside participation. 'Hybridity' may bring the tradition into question. How 'hybridity' and 'vitality' are related, and the consequences of their interaction, are of vital interest to this research.

This chapter explores the background, process and aftermath of the Covid-19 'Dance Chance' challenge phenomenon. It shows how Mongolian traditional performing arts were developed and produced new hybrids in the contemporary digitally connected world during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. It also describes how traditional performing arts reflect Mongolian political and cultural policies aimed at forming a national identity and reveals how hybridity and vitality are reflected in the Mongolian performing arts.

Mongolian performing arts during the socialist and post-socialist era

Since the People's Revolution in 1921, the performing arts have played a significant role in Mongolia. Under the Bogd Khan regime (1911 to 1924), the country was still a feudal and religious state. The eighth incarnation of the Jebtsundamba Khutagt, the spiritual head of the Gelug lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia and the highest lama, was elevated to Bogd Khan (theocratic ruler) when Mongolia declared independence from China in 1911. With a low literacy rate and an administrative system inherited from the Qing Dynasty, Mongolia at the time of its independence was not yet a nation in Anderson's sense of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). Moreover, modern mass media that mobilise the masses as a nation, like newspapers, did not exist in Mongolia, which means there was no Anderson's (1991) 'Print Capitalism'. Thus, to foster national solidarity following the People's Revolution, in place of the newspaper, revolutionary songs were composed and sung by the People's Army based on the lyrics and melody of old folk songs. These publicised the purpose of the revolution, and played an essential role in increasing military discipline and morale (Batsüren and Enebish, 1971: 10–11).

The movement to organise amateur performers spread from the military to the whole country. In the early 1920s, the first clubs were established in the capital and local centres for people's cultural and enlightenment activities, such as theatre, dance and sports groups (Natsagdorj, 1981: 134–136). Since the mid-1930s, in the process of expanding the movement and constructing clubs and theatres around the country, performing arts transformed their nature through their style. An essential shift was that songs, music and dances, which had previously been performed in the confined spaces of the *ger* (tent home), came to be performed on stage. Many professionally trained performers guided amateurs at the newly established clubs and theatres.

In 1940, when the remnants of the old feudal system were completely eliminated, and the Party regime was consolidated with the victory in the 1939 Khalkha-gol War between USSR-Mongolia and Japan-Manchukuo, the construction of socialism was declared as a national agenda. After World War II, the amateur performing arts movement changed its character from revolutionary and enlightenment activities to mass movements to create a new national culture, and many amateur performance contests came to be organised (Kamimura, 2001: 106). Activities of amateur performing arts circles at regional clubs and 'red corners' (spaces for social activities including performing arts) of local centres became more regular, and the number of participants increased. It was crucial to create a new performing art with 'revolutionary (socialist/internationalist) content' from traditions with 'ethnic forms' (ibid.: 106-107). The shift to performance on stage also led to an 'improvement' in musical instruments.

In the 1960s, Denis Yarovoi, a Soviet violin maker, changed the material and structure of the horse-head fiddle. He adopted a wooden plate for the front part of the resonance box instead of animal skin and made f-holes to resonate well in large halls and have a stable pitch (Enebish, 1991; Marsh, 2009).

Kamimura (2001) describes the development of the modern Mongolian *khöömii* from the earlier tradition, following the introduction of the European chorus into Mongolia. Badraa (1989: 17) writes that today's *khöömii* style, in which a singer sings the whole melody of a song in throat singing, had never been seen until the early 1950s. Singers used to chant one verse praising the masters of mountains and rivers of their homeland in a harsh voice and then sang one phrase of *khöömii*. A unique innovation happened in the first half of the 1950s. At an event held in Ulaanbaatar in 1954, M. Tsedee (1924–2005) sang a *khöömii* part of a three-part chorus song, which D. Luvsansharav (1927–2014) composed by arranging the praise sung before telling an Altai-Uriankhai epic. He learned the choral method under a Soviet music teacher's guidance and taught it at the Khovd Opera House from 1952 to 1954 (Jantsannorov, 1996: 78). G. Chimeddorj saw Tsedee singing *khöömii* at the event and was so impressed that he learned *khöömii* and created the modern Mongolian *khöömii* style, which involves singing only a melody line of a Mongolian folksong without voicing the lyrics. In short, the original 'syntagmatic' sequence of praise and *khöömii* was transformed into a 'paradigmatic' chorus, and then the *khöömii* part became independent solo singing (Kamimura 2001: 108). This case illustrates how the introduction of European music culture into Mongolian tradition led to the formation of a hybrid and new tradition.

Marsh (2009) points out that Mongolian political and intellectual elites who studied in socialist countries, particularly the USSR, and became 'cosmopolitan' but remained 'nationalist', played a significant role in the creation of a new culture, developing Geertz's (1973) argument of 'essentialism and epochalism' in decolonised new states' nationalism. The tendency of Mongolian elites to challenge the global standard with their local items is apparent. N. Jantsannorov, twice state-honoured music composer, told me that his interest since the socialist era had been how Mongolians could adapt to a globalising world while preserving their language and culture. The purpose of establishing the Morin-khuur Orchestra in 1992 was to explore the potential of the instrument in European classical music (23 August 2020, personal communication). As for Mongolian heroic epics, Rinchen (1966) writes that they should be translated, printed and published to occupy one corner of World Literature, which would be a pride of the nation. Geertz (1973: 273) wrote, '[T]he desire to become a people rather than a population, a recognized and respected somebody in the world who counts and is attended to, is, short of its satisfaction, apparently unappeasable.

At least it has nowhere yet been appeased.' This desire of the elites has fostered modern Mongolian cultural hybridity.

It was in the early 1980s that an alternative trend appeared. Badraa coined the term '*yazguur urlag*' ('traditional folk art'), which literally means 'root art' because *yazguur* signifies 'root' or 'origin.' 'Although people's works of art change with the historical development of society and accept to some degree a kind of innovation, I call those that retain elements more traditional than modern innovations as "*yazguur urlag*"... In English, they could be called "authentic folk art"' (Badraa, 1998: 31). The opposite concept of 'authentic folk art', 'fakelore', was first introduced by Richard M. Dorson in his 1950 article in the *American Mercury*. It was a response to 'the growing popularisation, commercialisation, and resulting distortion of folk materials' (Bendix, 1997: 190). During the Cold War, it was also applied to the ideological manipulation of folklore in communist countries (ibid.: 193).

Kamimura (2001) cites several reasons behind this shift in the 'traditional performing arts' concept. One reason is the rapid changes in Mongolian society. Accelerating modernisation and urbanisation during the socialist era meant that the urban (settled area) population exceeded the rural by 1979. The 'traditional culture' that had been a 'thing in itself' to most Mongolian people changed into something else they needed to review. The 'authentic' performing arts imply 'rooted in the land,' and amateur performing arts movements came to search for their own 'roots' (ibid.: 110). However, the system in which Western-styled, educated musicians in the capital are considered professionals and local traditional performers are considered amateurs, with the former 'guiding' the latter, was further strengthened. This led to traditional performers' complaints and frustration, and obstacles to passing on the local traditions to the next generation.

At a meeting (14–15 March 2006) of the UNESCO Morin Khuur project, for which I worked as an international consultant, a dispute broke out between 'professionals' and 'non-professionals' over whether musical notation should be adopted in teaching and training activities or not. Some 'professionals' argued that knowledge of notes would enable learners to go beyond their locality and learn any world music easily. 'Non-professionals' objected to them, saying, 'Using notes and an equal temperament scale would omit nuances from their local traditional *morin khuur* music.' A famous *ikel* player overtly complained that 'professional' players always stole or 'appropriated' their local traditions and made money without returning any to local people. Although the UNESCO project focused on diversity, safeguarding local traditions and transmitting them to the next generations, most 'professionals' appeared to have a negative perception of spending money on preserving local traditions as they thought the quality of

performances by local traditional players was not good enough and officials, even the Minister, claimed, 'It is useless to spend money on "dying" local cultures.'

Opening ceremony of Naadam Festival

The literal meaning of *naadam* is 'games', and the tradition of holding ceremonial games comprising the 'Three Manly Sports' (*Eriin gurvan Naadam*) – wrestling, archery and horseracing – dates back to the sixteenth century (Galindiv and Ösökhbayar, 1977). Naadams were held as a prayer for the Jebtsundamba khutagt's long life, and during the Chin dynasty, local naadams were dedicated to local mountain and river deities. In the socialist era since 1924, the primary purpose of the State Great Naadam was to celebrate the victory of the 1921 revolution, and now 'to symbolise Mongolia's independence, sovereignty, national unity, statehood' (The Law about the State Great Naadam, 4th Article). Since 1925, the State Great Naadam has been celebrated on the 11th of July every year as the 'People's Festival'.

Before 2020, the opening ceremony of the State Naadam Festival was held at the National Stadium in Ulaanbaatar. In the Soviet era (up till 1991) its main programme was socialist-styled mass games. In the early 1990s, the management of the festival opening ceremony was outsourced. Since 2013, it has featured Mongolian pop music, such as the rock song '*Tolin khöl*' by the band named Kharanga. It is expected to contribute to forming the national identity and promoting international tourism. In 2015, the Prime Minister, Ch. Saikhanbileg tried to invite Jennifer Lopez for a million-dollar reward, expecting an increase in foreign tourists.

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, B. Baatar of the Hero Entertainment Studio produced the first festival concert without spectators. The production was undertaken at the thirteenth-century Complex in Erdene *soum* (county), Töv *aimag* (province), about 100 kilometres east of Ulaanbaatar. During the opening ceremony video, famous pop and rock singers performed. The programme included hard rock band The HU's song, two Kalmyk songs – a folk song, '*Sharka Barka*', and a famous Kalmyk song, '*Eej mini*' (My mother) – as well as '*Jurai Gelden*', a Khoton ethnic folk song, '*Yookhor Khatarish*,' a Buryad folk song, and '*Tolin khöl*.' The singers and dancers wore traditional Mongolian *deels*, and the video showcased the nomadic life of old Mongolia on the steppe. Apart from some criticism of one performer singing a sorrowful Tuva folk song, '*Kongurei*', with a smile, people accepted the performances with high praise.

'Dance Chance' challenges and flash mobs

This Naadam opening video impressed O. Erdene-Ochir, an international dance master of competition Latin dance, president of the 'Royal Dance Mongolia' dance school and managing director of Dance Chance in Mongolia. He was born into a 'dancer' family and grew up in Khövsgöl *aimag* until he entered the National University of Mongolia Law Department, Commerce and Business. His mother and elder sisters are famous dancers. In 2020 he founded and continues to operate the NGO 'Dance Chance', which is a community and movement whose motto is 'Dance will open all the opportunities (chances).' He said, 'In 2014, we, 24 Mongolians, participated in a European dance festival. After watching various dance groups from around the world perform on stage, I realised how to attract the spectators' attention and got the hang of entertainment' (Erdene-Ochir, 31 August 2022).

On 13 July 2020, he posted a video clip on Facebook during a trip to western Mongolia. It was the clip for their first dance challenge, 'Dance Chance Challenge 1– Sharka Barka by Erdene and Khaliun'. Erdene included three elements in the clip: first, a Kalmyk folk song, '*Sharka Barka*', which was one of the items in the video of the Naadam 2020 opening ceremony; second, the style of 'Kiki Dance Challenge,' originating from the Canadian singer Drake's 'In My Feelings' (2018); and third, the environmental setting of the countryside. In the clip, Khaliun gets out of the car and dances according to the melody of the Kalmyk folk song along a country road on the summer green grassland, and Erdene joins her. The car follows their moves, and the camera shoots them from inside the car through the open door.

After the government lifted a strict Covid-19 ban around Naadam in July 2020, many urban residents made trips to the countryside by car, boosting domestic tourism. Because the borders were closed due to the pandemic, Ulaanbaatar's wealthier residents sought to replace the loss of travel abroad by visiting the Mongolian countryside during the best season. Covid-19 had not spread in Mongolia then. Around the Naadam festival, so many city residents were travelling in the countryside that most of my friends did not answer my calls. This boom in internal tourism led them to recognise the value of their country's natural beauty and pastoral culture.

Erdene said he had always wanted to make a clip like this. When he watched the 2020 Naadam video on TV, he thought, 'This is the song.' He prepared the shooting for a couple of days before the trip and took ten takes on the site. After he posted the clip, they continued travelling in areas without a mobile phone signal. Three days later, they were in Yaruu *soum* centre, Zavkhan *aimag*, and found it had gained over 20,000 views on Facebook. He quickly gained ten times more followers on Facebook than when he had posted only Latin dance

clips. The number of followers increased from 10,000 to 4,280,000 in the two years after this post. He said, 'While the market for Latin dance is tiny and limited to only European-style celebrations, such as the New Year, Mongolian ethnic dance has many more opportunities, such as weddings and Naadam festivals.' His followers actively participated in the dance challenge and posted various performance versions on Facebook. Soon, the wave became worldwide, reaching Mongolian people living abroad, many of whom yearned to return home to Mongolia but could not as most international flights to Mongolia had been cancelled. Another reason for gaining followers quickly was the simple, easy-to-learn choreography, which incorporated elements of Mongolian dance. He promptly posted two more clips in the same style on Facebook, organising the Dance Chances: Dance Chance Challenge 2 '*Jurai Gelden*' (19 July 2020) and Dance Chance Challenge 3 '*Khatarish*' (29 July 2020).

In the Dance Chance Challenge 'Sharka Barka', participants posted various clips, such as those by the Mongolian ballet dance, an army team, the famous Kalmyk singer Bembeeva and others who contributed from Seoul and Australia. For the second 'Jurai Gelden', clips were posted from Uvs province and Shibuya, Tokyo. Some Mongolian student groups in Japan had posted flash-mob Mongolian ethnic dance clips on YouTube before the pandemic. Erdene organised eleven Dance Chance challenges. From the sixth challenge, they collaborated with government organisations or at the request of commercial companies. For example, 'Dance Chance Zaisan Star shopping mall' merged Latin dance and flash mob performance style. Erdene says, 'I accept only the request of companies or organisations, the business of which is correct (*zöv*) and appropriate (*eyetei*) to the society, such as selling milk, dairy product *aarts* or mineral water. I refuse those companies that sell alcoholic drinks or carbonated or sugary drinks for children.' He did not think that dance challenges would be their primary activities. He organised the last five challenges in response to requests and has rarely organised new ones since the international dance contests restarted after the pandemic.

The enthusiasm for Dance Chance Challenges generated by social media has continued and involved local communities. Since February 2022, when all pandemic-related bans were lifted, people have become more active in club activities, particularly those related to Mongolian ethnic dance, at their workplaces and schools. Dance schools gained new students and people had more opportunities to participate in dance recitals and events. This shows the increase in people's interest and participation in traditional culture. The number of Facebook Group Dance Chance Challenge members is more than 11,000 at the time of writing.

'Khamag Mongol': expanding national and multi-ethnic identity

There are some prototype models for the 2020 Naadam Opening video, one of which is the 'Khamag Mongol' (All Mongols) project video (2 March 2013). The project was launched in 2013 on the initiative of singer S. Javkhlan. Famous singers from Mongolian peoples around the world participated in the project. They appealed to unite Mongolian peoples under the slogan 'Mongolian peoples, Brothers! Unite Together!' The video, a kind of homage to 'We Are the World' (1985), or 'We Are the Mongols', illustrates the concept. A Tuvan singer, Kalmyk singer, Buryat singer, Inner Mongolian singer and Javkhlan take turns appearing on horseback and singing a song, with lyrics by Javkhlan and music by D. Jargalsaikhan, leader of a rock band 'Chinggis Khan'. In the last part, they sing together around a fire hearth, then ride horseback and bow to the Chinggis Khan statue in Sukhbaatar Square. In between, studio recording and project meeting scenes are inserted. A clip of Kalmyk singer Gilyana Bembeeva singing 'Sharka Barka' was also produced for the project, which is also one of the prototypes of the Naadam 2020 video in terms of singing and dancing in the grassland. Javkhlan himself mentioned that his project had inspired the Naadam Opening video and Dance Chance Challenges in the YouTube clip of 'Khamag Mongol-2' (20 November 2022).

Samandyn Javkhlan, one of Mongolia's most famous singers, comes from Bökhmörön *soum*, Uvs *aimag*, and belongs to the Dörvöd, a minority ethnic group in western Mongolia. His homeland borders the Tuva Republic of the Russian Federation. In Uvs *aimag*, many ethnic groups live together, such as the Bayad and Khoton, which may have influenced the development of his identity. He is known as a zealous nationalist, often making public remarks about Chinggis Khan as a great ancestor who united the Mongolian peoples; he also tends to wear an unusual Khünnü (Xiongnu)-style *deel* with a straight band without a collar at official places and went to parliament on horseback when he was a member of parliament (2016–2020).

In Mongolia, Gellner's principle of nationalism – 'the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner, 1983: 1) – was applied to cultural policies, as discussed earlier. The state borders of Mongolia have limited the Mongolian national identity, and mentioning commonality with Mongolian peoples around the world might have been harshly criticised as Pan-Mongolism during the socialist era. Thus, Mongolia's national identity has been shaped within its territory, involving the homogenisation of domestic culture and the differentiation from foreign cultures. In this process, Modern Mongolian Khöömii, which had to be distinguished from Tuva *khöömei*, came to be known as '*khöömii*', rather than '*khöömei*'.

Recently, however, as seen in the video clip above, they have come to emphasise ties with all Mongolian peoples. Mongolian identity appears to be shifting or expanding beyond Mongolia, possibly extending to the territory of Chinggis Khaan's Mongolian Empire, while still entangled with the existing national identity. The 'ABOUT' section of the YouTube clip of the project closing ceremony in September 2013 says, 'The descendants of Genghis Khan, living in the territory of Mongolia, China, and Russia, gathered on the same stage in Ulaanbaatar, a project called "*Khamag Mongol*" – "All Mongolia". The ideological inspirer and initiator of this project is the honoured artist, the golden voice of Mongolia, the singer Samandyn Javkhlan' (2 August 2015). The project reflects diaspora sentiments inspired by Chinggis Khaan's great empire, although it did not include the Kazakh people. In addition to this project, some recent developments in Mongolia reflect the expanding national identity. At the 2011 Naadam Festival opening ceremony, Ts. Elbegdorj, the president of Mongolia, officially celebrated the 2,220th anniversary of the founding of the Xiongnu state for the first time in Naadam history.

As nationalism has changed, the search for authenticity in culture has shifted. While the first 'Folk Traditional Performing Arts Festival' in 1983 tried to find local long-held traditions as authentic culture, since then, the legitimacy of authenticity has come to be sought in 'reconstructed' history. In the interview 'The Xiongnu Bielgee Dance Has the Possibility to Appear on the World Stage' by Montsame, M. Möngöntsetseg, a dance teacher and researcher, identified a Turkic word in the eleventh century as an equivalent to the current Mongolian '*büjig*' and said, 'People think "*bie bielgee*" dance is of western Mongolia. Actually, it is the dance (*büjig*) of all Mongolians' (Bolor, 2020). It is generally accepted that the modern Mongolian traditional dance was developed from variations of the Western Mongolian ethnic dance '*bie bielgee*' with the guidance of Soviet dance teachers (Dolgorsüren, 1962; Nanjid, 2017). Möngöntsetseg denied it with the ancient Turkic word and asserted that the recently reconstructed 'Xiongnu Bielgee Dance' can be globally accepted like The Hu (a worldwide famous Mongolian hard rock band), whose name derives from the Khünnü (Xiongnu) Empire.

On the other hand, the local traditions on which modern culture could be based are fading away; some are deterritorialised from the local context and reterritorialised into new forms of nationalism in these narratives. Most young Mongolians do not hesitate to wear Western Mongolian ethnic costumes, even Kazakh ones, though Kazakhs are usually considered to be different people from Mongolians. Such a nationalist field led Erdene's Dance Chance Challenge to the next but conventional stage.

Nomads World Cultural Festival: realistic re-experience of the virtual world

Mongolia has a long-term development policy, 'Vision-2050', which aims to establish Mongolia as 'a leading country with a preserved nomadic civilisation, based on national mentality, heritage, culture and mindset, and centred on the creative Mongolian citizen'. The first Nomads World Cultural Festival, 'Nomadic Mongolia-2018,' was organised in 2018 in the area of Hui Doloon Khudag in Ulaanbaatar. The government decided to organise the festival every two years but could not in 2020 due to the pandemic. Two years after Naadam 2020, the Nomads World Cultural Festival took place on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar from 12–14 August 2022. Various performers, selected from 21 provinces and nine districts of the capital, participated in this festival, as they had in previous performing arts contests and festivals in the socialist era. The main ceremonies were held in the open field, and performing arts activities and exhibitions were organised in the open air and in traditional *ger*s erected for each province on the grassland on the northern bank of the Tuul River. About 23,500 people visited the festival.

This festival was a realistic re-experience of the virtual ethnic world of the Naadam opening video and Dance Chance Challenges. All visitors were strongly encouraged to come wearing traditional Mongolian costumes, like an anime cosplay event. They were also urged to actively participate in various activities, such as archery and knucklebone shooting. *Deeltei Mongol* festival (Mongolians wearing *deel*) is another participatory festival that has been organised since 2007, with participants wearing a *deel*, but held in the central Sukhbaatar square of Ulaanbaatar, where the metropolitan government has organised various festivals under the slogan 'City of Nomads' since 2023. Among these festivals, the 'Nomads World Cultural Festival' in 2022 most successfully incorporated people's re-evaluation of and desire to participate in national and ethnic culture following the pandemic.

The third festival in 2023 was held on 18–20 August in Taij Khairkhan, Nalaikh District, Ulaanbaatar. This festival emphasised the twentieth anniversary of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage and had an international scope, coinciding with the government's declaration of 2023–2024 as the 'Go to Mongolia Year' with the aim of increasing the number of international tourists to Mongolia to one million a year. Representatives from various countries with nomadic cultures were invited to participate in the festival, and around 63,000 visitors attended. The festival's homepage says, 'Its goal is to promote and celebrate the uniqueness of Mongolian culture and its nomadic heritage on the global stage'. Here, we see the same thinking that has been passed down since Rinchen's argument concerning the Mongolian heroic epic (Rinchen, 1966), which directly links the value of culture

to international recognition. Mongolian national pride should be guaranteed by foreigners' evaluation.

In addition to the nationwide cultural festivals, ethnic group-level festivals have also been held in Western Mongolia, which is renowned for its rich ethnic diversity. These festivals, such as the *Tonjoo* Zakhchin Cultural Heritage Festival and the Uriankhai, Tuva Cultural Heritage Days held in the summer of 2022, showcase the unique traditions, customs and arts of the ethnic groups in western Mongolia. The Uriankhai, Tuva Cultural Heritage Days took place near Tolbo Lake in Bayan-Ölgii *aimag* on 25 and 26 July 2022. Uriankhai and Tuva are two minority ethnic groups in western Mongolia that have lived side by side for centuries, but have regarded each other as distinct ethnic groups, particularly since the mid-twentieth century. These events reflected the unique identity of Western Mongolian ethnic groups, while the main events of these two festivals also took place in the open air.

Mongolian traditional performing arts or culture are critical resources to mobilise people, not only for the government but also for individual politicians. For instance, two members of parliament initiated the Uriankhai, Tuva Cultural Heritage Days in 2022, and some politicians intended to boost their popularity ahead of the general election in 2024 by using internet content showing ethnic performing arts. The Minister of Culture would not escape criticism for using cultural events during her tenure to increase her chances of election to parliament in 2024.

Hybridity as trans-contextual bricolage

In the hybridisation process, a cultural element is de-contextualised from its original culture and re-contextualised within a new one. However, not all original contexts disappear; some contexts are referenced, adopted or implanted into the new culture along with the cultural element, as cultural elements function as nodes of contexts, influencing related contexts and thereby modifying or replacing previous ones. The extent to which the original context is adopted depends on the power disparity between the two cultures, which means that cultural hybridity studies are related to the topics of colonialism and diaspora (see Young, 2005; Pieterse, 2009). Some essential contexts of a minor culture element are 'bleached,' leading to what is known as cultural appropriation. Kraidy (2005: 9) argued that 'hybridity is fully compatible with globalisation' and proposed a framework called 'critical transculturalism'. However, as discussed earlier, the processes of cultural hybridity are complex, intertwining domestic and foreign contexts while simultaneously generating new ones, which is a function of

'open-ended ongoing mixing' (Pieterse, 2009: 57). Therefore, cultural hybridity can be understood as trans-contextual bricolage.

The video titled '*Dance Chance UID 100 jiliin oi. Flash Mob*', shot on 28 June 2021, was made for the 100th Anniversary of Mongolia's earliest established ex-state department store. Nomin Co., the owner, requested Erdene to introduce the store, which had reopened after a fire damaged the building on 7 June 2020, showcasing each floor. He only arranged the dancers' positions and took just one take. In this video, Erdene combined the elements of flashmob dance and commercial purpose seen in '*Dance Chance Zaisan star shopping mall*' (18 September 2020), and the music and song of '*DANCE CHANCE - Erdene and Khaliun - Evtei Mongol*' (11 February 2021). For copyright clearance, Erdene and Khaliun remixed the music, sang the vocals themselves and combined three songs from the Naadam 2020 opening video and the first three 'Dance Chance' challenges into a single sequence. The success of the dance challenges led to a commercial version, the above clip titled 'Zaisan Star Shopping Mall', which combined the Latin dance and flashmob. The reward for the clip 'State Department Store' was three million Tugrik (approximately 1,000 US dollars), which covered the salaries of junior instructors at the dance school.

The internet served as the infrastructure or medium for the dance challenges, acting as a trans-contextual bricolage by mixing previously disparate cultural elements and people. Mongolia has a relatively high rate of internet usage, and many Mongolians are accustomed to watching and producing content on social media. Some herders choose to move to locations with better mobile phone signals to stay connected. The government also encouraged people to use the internet to minimise human contact and avoid gatherings during the pandemic. Although the disparity between settlement centres with internet access and rural areas without mobile phone signals was evident during remote learning, most herders, who usually reside in areas without internet, become active social media users when they stay in the centres. As well as the internet, the 'Domestic Tourism Boom' was one of the direct contexts of the first Dance Chance Challenge, 'Sharka Barka'.

This clip, 'State Department Store', carries numerous historical contexts. One of these is the 'All Mongols' project clip, which marked a new trend in the 'expansion' of Mongolian nationalism and inspired the Naadam 2020 opening video. The web of these contexts can be traced back to revolutionary songs, continues to knit together and self-propagate through foreign and domestic powers as well as micropolitics, and culminates in the identity politics that have become prominent in contemporary Mongolia.

Conclusion

The Naadam 2020 opening ceremony video, produced as a government anti-pandemic measure, inspired Erdene to organise dance challenges. The sense of stagnation caused by the pandemic and the government's strict anti-pandemic policies led to the rise of his dance challenges. For Mongolian people living abroad, as Mongolia was safer than other countries before the explosive spread of the Omicron variant in the second half of 2021, those who had lost their jobs and felt it difficult to make a living there wanted to return home but could not do so. The Mongolian ethnic dance challenges were outlets for their longing to return home. Government measures to cut the movement of humans, livestock, and goods generated various detours, reconnections, and new connections as people adapted, rejected, and reacted to them. The dance challenges were one of those detours. Erdene merged various elements into his dance clips, and his followers performed and posted many variants from their locations and local contexts, showing a high level of 'hybridity'.

This hybridity of Mongolian 'traditional' performing arts is rooted in the socialist era, based on and intertwining with the contexts of the legacy of socialist cultural policies. From the early 1920s to the 1930s, the performing arts were the weapon of revolution and, after World War II, a means to create a 'new' culture appropriate to a socialist nation-state under construction. Although an alternative trend to evaluate and authenticate 'old' cultural elements was introduced in the early 1980s, it could not become prominent. The target of the search for authenticity of culture shifted from actual but 'dying' local traditions to reconstructed historical and archaeological sources.

The Nomads World Cultural Festival in 2022 was a tangible re-creation of the virtual ethnic world of the 2020 and 2021 Naadam opening videos and Dance Chance Challenges. The emotional reactions of people captured on the internet during the pandemic were shaped into government-organised festivals designed to foster and preserve national cultural pride and promote its uniqueness internationally. Since the end of the socialist era, these two domestic and international goals have been closely linked by the idea of measuring the value of ethnic culture through international recognition. Increasing global recognition, a longstanding desire of Mongolian cultural elites during the socialist era, also serves an economic purpose as part of the policy to expand international tourism and promote the export of Mongolian cultural content. This desire, along with their longing to retain a distinct Mongolian identity in the face of globalisation, drove the creation of cultural hybrids.

Over the last decade, the government has attempted to trace the state's origins to the Xiongnu Empire. They have also utilised traditional Mongolian performing arts for this purpose. The national development plan reflects the

idea that Mongolia should be the leader of the former nomadic world ruled by Chingis Khaan, the distant successor of Xiongnu, the first nomadic state in world history. The identity of the Mongolian people is no longer locked within the state's borders as in the socialist era, but it has expanded to include the nomadic world as their territory, while holding a solid national identity. Now, they can include the cultural elements in the wider area as part of their own culture if they want.

The Covid-19 pandemic made the Mongolian people rediscover their country's nature and ethnic culture, and it became an incentive for them to participate in ethnic performing art activities. Those activities were confined to a virtual space on the internet during the pandemic, but since then, most ethnic cultural events have been held in the open air. G. Enkhbat, director of the National Centre of Cultural Heritage, explained this as being 'to display the harmony between nature and human beings'. Mongolian traditional performing arts, going back and forth between reality and virtuality, between the present and the past, entangling various elements and contexts, are producing new hybrids today.

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❄ *Chapter 11* ❄

Between *Khot* (City) and *Khüdüü* (Countryside): Negotiating Rural and Urban Identities in Post-Covid Mongolia

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Introduction

This chapter presents qualitative interview data that was gathered in the summers of 2023 and 2024 in a rural county of Khentii province, Mongolia. Gathered in conjunction with an array of survey data focused on changes in social network structures, the data revealed some surprising shifts in herder concerns about rural–urban dynamics. In contrast to initial field visits in 2019 and reaching back to 2006 when the lead author began collecting ethnographic data in this community (Murphy, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), the substance and tone of conversations about the identities and orientations that comprise rural and urban lifeways had markedly changed from a recognition of mutual difference and complementarity to one that revealed increasing frictions between *khot* (city) and *khüdüü* (countryside), illuminating emerging anxieties about the future of pastoralism and rurality in a rapidly changing country.

Evidently, the context of these changes is situated squarely in a world emerging from the severe disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the policies and practices that shaped our experiences of that event. Covid-19, like any other large-scale disruption, exposed rifts and frictions within societies and, in many cases, exacerbated them. The scholarly field of disaster research has demonstrated that catastrophic events like this are often 'revelatory' (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 1999). Mongolia is no stranger to these revelatory politics. Frequent catastrophic *dzud* events over the last 25 years have marked profound shifts in pastoral society, shaping how rural producers make their livelihoods (Ahearn, 2018; Janes and Chuluundorj, 2015; Mijiddorj et al., 2019; Murphy, 2014b, Murphy and Ichinkhorloo, 2023; Sternberg, 2010). Much of the Covid-19 experience in Mongolia was superficially no different than that in other coun-

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tries but, under finer resolution, the policy, planning and practices that herders experienced were quite distinct and had diverse consequences.

However, Covid-19 is not everything. Many social, political and economic processes that have generated change on the steppe are rooted in earlier, deeper and much more profound ruptures, particularly the post-socialist transformation of rural society (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999). In the wake of these transformative changes, rising concerns from herders (described below) and other publics about social inequality, corruption, unchecked resource extraction and a rapidly changing climate have come to the foreground. Nevertheless, these frictions have been amplified during Covid-19 by a reconfigured media landscape, especially with the rise of social media. Yet, herders have not been simply passive consumers of these media and the discourses they transmit; in fact, herders have also engaged with these concerns, reflecting a growing awareness of their political position and identity within the country.

Below we discuss how herders negotiated the politics of the rural and the urban in our interviews, including both dominant themes across the interviews as well as emerging themes that appear to be both salient and acute. Some of these logics were new or surprising to the researchers and some resonated with long held expressions of rural and urban difference, whether complementary or contradictory. By examining the frictions between *khot* and *khüdüü*, we aim to explore how herders conceptualise rural and urban orientations and how they perceive the changing identities of people who inhabit these social positions. In doing so, we asked herders what it means to be rural or urban and what that means for their lifeways and the future of pastoralism in Mongolia.

Rural–urban cultural dynamics in Mongolia

This chapter builds on foundational work done by David Sneath (2006) who noted in his exploration of the city and country, 'Mongolian culture has inherited distinctive sets of notions, dispositions and institutions oriented towards the rural, local and domestic on the one hand, and towards centres, élites and political structures on the other' (140). Utilising Bourdieu's concept of habitus, he describes how the everyday work of pastoral and domestic production generates a social and cultural architecture that he calls a 'rural-localist' orientation. These orientations, he argues, are generally 'associated with "authentic" Mongolian culture, simplicity and tradition' (144). In contrast, as sites of commerce, politics and foreign influence, cities generate an architecture of what he calls the 'elite-centralist' orientation where 'chicanery', elite power and cosmopolitanism are generated (144). His goal, he argues, is not to recreate a problematic dichotomy that juxtaposes essentialised notions of the 'nomadic' with the 'settled' à la

modernisation theory; rather, it's to explore historically contingent orientations and identities as expressed by the people who live them. Below we examine the articulation of these orientations and the political and economic forces shaping them over time. In doing so, we hope to complicate and problematise the contemporary identity politics that herders engage in.

Long-held social evolutionary frameworks have argued that pastoralism, due to its 'nomadism', was anathema to the settled nature of high civilisation (Sneath, 2007). In contemporary Mongolia, this logic parallels contemporary interpretations of capitalist stages (Munkherdene, 2018). Archaeological and historical evidence demonstrates, however, that Mongolian pastoralists have long interacted with cities – Kharhorin, for instance, was the settled capital of the Mongol empire (Bemmann et al., 2022; Honeychurch, 2015). Despite the reliance on the productive capacities of livestock herds, cities and settled life have played a critical role in Mongolian society for well over 300 years (Atwood, 2015). Ulaanbaatar (previously known as Ikh Khuree), for example, although initially a mobile settlement, was founded in 1639 and settled in 1778 (Bawden, 1968). We also see the emergence of a settled aristocracy and monastic culture throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was further entrenched during Qing imperial rule. This spatial organisation of Mongolian society persisted throughout the brief period of independence as a theocracy until the establishment of Mongolia as a communist state in 1921.

It was during this period that we witness a profound shift in rural and urban orientations. Socialist reforms stressed Marxist evolutionary ideas about social and historical transformations, presuming that societies moved through stages from pre-capitalist to capitalist and then ultimately to socialism and communism. Within this logic, the role of workers and industrialisation is paramount in engineering that change. In a pastoral society, this logic was troubled by the ecological realities of raising livestock on the steppe. By the 1950s, however, we see an increasing focus on industrialisation to create the conditions for a proletarian working class, including the collectivisation of agriculture, which would transform livestock herders into workers. Consequently, 'communist authorities looked approvingly on urbanisation as a natural outcome of industrialisation; cities were seen as the highest form of advance and presented the showcase of social progress' (Diener and Hagen, 2013: 632). In long-range communist planning, exemplified by collectivisation, 'pastoralism was certain to disappear' (Bruun and Narangoa, 2006: 4). Uradyn Bulag (1998), for example, describes how national symbols were transformed from realist portrayals of herders and their livestock to abstract, figurative interpretations that reflect a renegotiation of Mongolian identity as a result of both industrialisation and urbanisation.

In the post-socialist period, in contrast, Bumochir and Munkherdene (2019) describe how a return to 'traditional culture' (*ulamjlalt soyol*) articulates with a state policy of cultural revitalisation that aims to bridge a gap between the pre-socialist past and the post-socialist present (see also Kaplonski, 2005). As part of this movement, Diener and Hagen (2013: 623) note, 'pastoral ideals have retained great prominence in national symbols and cultural practices'. However, Myadar (2022) complicates this analysis, arguing that even in settings that appear to valorise rural values and traditions such as political rallies or state *ovoo* worship rituals, rural values and identities are captured in something akin to what Trouillot (2003) calls the 'savage slot'. Here, rural identities can be meaningful only insofar that they provide essentialised, cultural fodder for national identity-making, while support for the actual practices of herding that sustain rural values and identities remains unnecessary.

In addition to historical explorations of state policy and national identity, grounded ethnographic investigations describe how rural and urban identities have been shaped by larger political and economic forces. As Mearns (2004) details, the collapse of state enterprises and the privatisation of pastoral collectives (*negdel*) in the early to mid 1990s resulted in a doubling of urban to rural migration. In Sneath's study from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, he found that many preferred pastoral lifestyles, mirroring similar orientations in cultural revitalisation policy (Bumochir and Munkerdene, 2018). He notes that 'pastoralists talked of the beauty of their natural surroundings, that they couldn't imagine living in the city in "cages"' (Sneath, 2006: 156). Moreover, they saw 'rural children [grow] up hard-working, warmhearted, practical and competent at a wide range of tasks, unlike city children who (despite their educational opportunities) they thought of as prone to laziness and acquisitive and faddish consumerism' (156). Even in cities, he notes that 'rather than urban life coming to the rural, as it did in the old regime, now rural lifestyles appear in the city' (155). It was not uncommon in the early 2000s to see urban residents in Ulaanbaatar continuing to wear *deel* (traditional robes), ride horses in town, invest in silver saddles, snuff bottles, or decorated bowls (*ayaga*), or other evident symbols of rural culture.

Although, superficially, some elements of this continue as the urban ultra-wealthy invest in hyper-expensive versions of these symbols and maintain large horse herds, these practices seem to reflect a growing decontextualisation from actual rural lifeways rather than an abiding connection. Behind this seeming continuity in national identity, Sneath (2006) found that the cultural legacies of the socialist period, distinguishing the rural (*khüdüünii*) from the urban (*khotiin*), were largely sustained across Mongolian society. An 'elite-centralist' orientation that is predominantly urban 'conceives of "culture" (*soyol*) in terms of a gradient

of refinement and sophistication. In this discourse rural people are depicted as having a low "cultural level / standard" (*soyoliin khemjee*), whereas high education and the social milieu of the great cities bestows "high culture"' (2006: 156). Consequently, despite the place of 'pastoral-nomadic imagery … as a cultural core' (Myadar, 2007), Sneath argues that 'rural culture is often denigrated for the very traditionality that is celebrated in other contexts, and the pastoral lifestyle is commonly described in terms of poverty and backwardness' (2006: 156). This attention to *soyol* as a marker of difference is reiterated by herders in the data presented below.

In the context of these post-socialist identity politics, Mongolia has witnessed a major demographic reversal since the early 2000s with a 4.4 per cent annual rate of rural-to-urban migration (Xu, 2021: 5), with urban areas accounting for nearly 73 per cent of the total population by 2014 (Xu, 2021: 2). The drivers of rural-urban migration have received substantial attention in the literature (Alga, 2020; Amartuvshin, 2021; Barbary, 2019; Blom, 2014; Davasambuu, 2013; Dore, 2010; Golik, 2021; Javklhanbayar, 2017; Mayer, 2016; Roeckert, 2021; Tarne et al., 2022). Much of it has explored the connections between loss of livelihood from repeated catastrophic *dzud* disasters and migration (Mayer, 2016; Tarne et al., 2022; Roeckert, 2021); however, increasingly it is clear that migration decisions appear to be multifactorial, with pursuit of higher education, improved employment opportunities, increased access to health and other social services, and the cosmopolitan cultural promises of urban life being other primary drivers. The broader context of this shift, as Mayer (2016) points out, is inextricably linked to the lack of policy and development focus on rural areas and the near absence of public support for the agricultural sector. The consequence has been a mass influx of young people to the city and a substantial reconfiguration of rural demography.

However, the impact of this demographic reversal and the resultant spatial shifts in livelihood and development on contemporary rural and urban identities remains little explored (see Rakowski, 2021 for an exception). Early analyses, such as Gardelle and Zhao's (2019) exploration of the educational sector, argue that Mongolian identities are formed around a complementary rather than contradictory relationship between rural and urban. For instance, Blom (2014) states, complicating rural and urban distinctions, that most households in Mongolia should be understood as multi-spatial, straddling both urban and rural livelihoods and extended through urban and rural kin networks. Additionally, Gardelle and Zhao (2019: 370) continue, 'the contrast between urban and rural living standards is far less marked than it had been in the preceding decade'. They quote a rural resident stating: 'These years, in my life, the change is having a television. We have all the news, as if we were in the city. There

are no distinctions anymore.' Diener and Hagen (2013: 644) also support this argument with a quote from an interview with an urban resident cited by Belt (2011: 121): 'even if they've (herders) been in UB [Ulaanbaatar] for years, their mentality is still nomadic … in our hearts, we're all nomads'.

Certainly, these ideas and sentiments still circulate, but the data we present below challenge this idea of complementarity. Furthermore, more recent research has begun to explore the growing contradictions and tensions in rural and urban identities, as well as their connections to migration and other political and economic shifts. Fraser (2021: 662) describes how herders who migrate to cities experience a profound 'shift between these two lifeworlds' of the rural and urban. His research highlights the frustrations many former herders have encountered in their transitions, focusing particularly on the loss of skills that are valued differently in rural and urban settings. What might on the surface look like a consistent and complementary identity across rural and urban divides turns out to be more a complicated identity politics. Below, we explore some of these contradictions and tensions circulating around rural and urban identities.

Methods and research sites

The data we explore in this chapter were gathered as part of a larger, international research collaboration with anthropologists in diverse locations around the world. That larger project aims to explore and test models of the impact of changes in social network structure on wealth and inequality. As part of that initiative, the authors additionally engaged herders through in-depth, semi-structured and unstructured interviews as well as traditional participant observation methods.

The research was conducted in two sites, one in the high, mountainous desert steppe of western Mongolia and the other in the desert steppe grasslands of eastern Mongolia where the lead author has conducted research since 2004. The data described here comes from this latter site, Bayankhutag *soum* in Khentii *aimag*. All actively herding households within one *bag* (district), called Tsantii Kholoi, were surveyed (n= 78 in 2019, n=72 in 2024) and approximately a third of these were interviewed (n=24) in June and July 2023, and fourteen in June 2024. Interviews lasted from one to three hours and were wide-ranging but generally focused on social networks including rural–urban connections. Interviews were also conducted with *soum* (county) and *bag* governors, extension agents, and other officials. Where possible, we conducted interviews with both spouses present; however, in some cases only male heads of household were present and in other cases only female heads of households were present. Two of the households were single female-headed households. Ethnic composition included primarily Khalkha but with significant numbers of Uriankhai and

Dörvöd, though there is intermarriage across all three groups. Ages of household heads ranged from their late twenties to their eighties. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, either in the countryside or in the provincial centre.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software. Codes were initially applied in vivo but then recoded with a priori codes derived from interview questions. Two of the authors coded concurrently to ensure reliability across codes. Each coded set was then analysed separately to explore salient themes across the data. A key set of those themes is presented in the following section.

Data

In this section, we present data illustrating how herders in Tsantii Kholoi district made sense of rural and urban orientations in the wake of the pandemic. First, we examine how herders make sense of the ways larger political, economic and social forces both foster and amplify urban perceptions of herders and herding lifeways. What we present is not data from urban residents themselves, but rather how herders think others, i.e., urban residents, conceptualise the rural. Specifically, we identify the role that livestock product markets (especially meat), schooling challenges, and *dzud* disasters serve as productive points of social and cultural friction. Secondly, we explore how herders understand urban orientations and identities, focusing on the role of political and economic elites in crafting their views. And lastly, we briefly examine what these shifting dynamics mean for the future.

Rural orientations

The dominant, recurrent theme across interviews frames rural–urban differences through the different ways in which one engages with the livestock product market. Urban residents are largely dependent on rural livestock producers for their meat consumption, a central aspect of Mongolian cuisine. Rural producers, conversely, are also highly dependent on the sales of meat and livestock. As one herder explains:

> We live on the raw materials of our animals. We sell our meat in the market, we sell our leather, wool and cashmere. That way you will have money. Apart from that, [in the city] your boss will give you a lumpy piece of paper called 'salary'. But herders earn money only by selling their animals. Otherwise, no one pays us money for herding cattle. (Male herder, 45, 2023)

Due to this mutual dependency, outside of social or kin networks, meat serves as the primary link between urban and rural residents. As such, it is not

surprising that there is substantial anxiety around the market price of meat, a point of friction through which rural livelihoods are understood. For herders, the price of meat is critical to the long-term viability of their livelihoods, and post-socialist changes in the commodity chain, specifically the emergence of middleman traders (*chenj*), put them at the mercy of an uncertain and at times rapidly fluctuating marketplace.

> The life of the herder is not getting any better. In the old days, the government prepared things by coordinating raw materials ... they used to buy raw materials, animals, and meat ... Now, a single individual named '*chenj*' will borrow a few bucks from the bank and get a cheaper price directly from the herders. And they sell it again (in the city). (Female herder, 63, 2023)

The consequences of this market structure extend beyond the market itself, shaping how producers and consumers view each other. Here, a herder explains:

> And why is it that the people of the city misunderstand life in the countryside? 'The herders are selling their meat at a high price, and we are buying very expensive meat.' They don't charge the same price directly from the herdsman's town ... It is true that one kilogram of meat is 10,000, but [we sell] 1 kg for only 5,000 ... [*chenj*] goes to the city and charges 20,000, which is a lot of money, isn't it? And now, I think that the people of the city do not feel good about the life of those herders. (Female herder, 44, 2023)

Urban consumers, she argues, misunderstand price composition and the structure of the marketing chain. In other words, they believe that herders are the primary beneficiaries of higher prices. Another herder elaborates on this:

> Now, for example, people in the city are buying beef at the counter for 20,000. But they think herders sell at the same amount, [that] they sell their meat at a high price, and they think herders are rich ... That's why people say, 'Mongolia has so many millions of animals, but the price of meat is so high, and the herders have kept it expensive.' But now people think that herders are rich ... But only these few '*chenj*' are being enriched ... now, the richest people are money changers. Those who drive around in a big jeep and have a lot of money are money changers. Both in the countryside and in the city. (Female teacher and herd owner, 39, 2023)

There are several points to note here. The first is that herders believe urban meat consumers fundamentally misunderstand how livestock production has evolved since the era of socialism. The idea that the relationship between the total number of livestock and the price of meat in the market should represent a simple supply–demand curve ignores why the number of animals has risen. Partly this rise is due to the importance of cashmere income relative to that

of other livestock products, but even without the upward pressure of cashmere prices on herd size, individual household herd numbers function as a means of insuring a household's primary assets against catastrophic loss. Secondly, the herder believes that urban residents may confuse the wealth of livestock traders or other rural residents with that of herders. Here the herder notes that outward symbols of wealth like 'jeeps' are misleading. Another herder argued that once urban residents began hearing about households with 4,000–5,000 livestock, they jumped to the conclusion that all herders are wealthy. He continues, 'now, they think, I have a car, a silver knife, a big saddle, and a snuff bag, and now I'm starting to get rich' (Male herder, 55, 2024). All of this additionally implies that herders should not be wealthy.

Another key misconception is how rising meat prices mask the reality of how prices more generally affect herder livelihoods. As one herder explains:

> Compared to the US dollar, the price of meat has fallen even more than in 10 years … And that's why it's making herders even poorer. In my eyes, the herders are only getting poorer while raising more animals. (Male herder, 42, 2024)

Here, the herder highlights the role that inflation plays in the relative value of meat compared to other goods, especially those items dependent on global markets. The terms of trade for livestock products overall do not benefit rural producers, who must then, in turn, purchase food and other consumables, as well as incur substantial costs such as school-related expenses. Another herder explains, 'we are selling the food for 10,000 just to get our own food' (Male herder, 51, 2023).

Some herders also considered the converse – how livestock product prices position urban residents' feelings about themselves. As one herder argues hypothetically about the increasing post-Covid tension between rural and urban:

> Why is it so bad? Well, look at the beginning of Covid, when the price of meat is left alone, there is no revolt [from urban people]. Whether it's 5,000, 7, 8,000, a single person will not go and march … when the number is 5,000. But the people of the city will 'march with their voices' [protest] when it rises to 20,000 during Covid. They will kill themselves! And they ask, don't our herders feel sorry for us? (Male herder, 64, 2023)

Here, the herder is imagining the logic of urban residents, situating the tension in a kind of appeal to a moral economy. In other words, the logic regarding meat prices that they imagine urban residents express is one that appeals not to market-based logics of supply and demand, but rather to ideas that food is both a right and something to be shared with a community. In other words, the exchange is perceived as unethical, if not coercive price gouging.

Another way in which rural-urban dynamics have shaped the identities and orientations of city and country residents is through schooling. Ahearn and Bumochir (2016) describe the phenomenon of community straddling that has emerged over the last few decades following the collapse of the socialist state. They detail how families split their time between the countryside, where they maintain their herds, and the county and provincial centres where schools, hospitals and other social services are located. The consequence of these pressures is split families – husbands remain in the countryside, typically year-round and often alone in the winter, and wives stay with their children in the centres, only coming out to the countryside in the summer months or during periods of high labour needs (Ahearn, 2018). These pressures persist throughout the life course of children, from childhood to adolescence. As one herder notes:

> So, when I look at families now, there are two parts, mother and father. The wife goes to the centre and that's how your other child becomes separated from his real life in the countryside. (Male herder, 75, 2023)

Many herders discussed a sense of feeling trapped by this conundrum. One herder referred to the splitting of a household as simply 'the start of divorce'. Ethnographic observation of these forces also evidences the immense pressure and burden that split households put on families. But many are unwilling to risk their children's schooling – for children, education is their ticket to university and better job prospects, almost always in the city. As one herder mentioned:

> It's not possible for both parents to be together. And since the school is educating children, they will follow that anyway, there's no way to get out of school. (Male herder 64, 2023)

For these families, there are immediate and important effects on households. On the one hand, the loss of additional labour across the year strains the physical and mental health of men who remain alone, and women who bear the brunt of effectively single parenting for much of the year (see Ahearn, 2018 for a detailed analysis). Additionally, the phenomenon has reshaped the demographic makeup of rural areas.

> Some [of the herding households] are now very poor in manpower. In general, as a herder, young people want to go to the city for school, culture, etc. So now, in general, only people of retirement age are living in the countryside. (Male herder, 75, 2023)

Many herders commented on the shifting demographics among herding households. As another herder described, echoing Sneath's (2006) discussion of elite orientations, 'young herders are rare … if you go to school to become cultured (*soyoltoi boloh*), you will never come back'. The absence of young people

in the countryside signifies consequences far beyond the individual household and even the local community.

> What if you go to school and go to 'culture'?... If the old herding households 'become gods' (pass away), then who will take care of the animals? Who will feed Mongolia? It's difficult. We must feed it. (Male herder, 35, 2023)

Demographic shifts, this herder argues, intersect with larger frames of national identity by posing a threat to the national food supply – a theme we reflect on below. Still, not all interviewees agreed that this problem is irreversible or inevitable. Some feel that the countryside has become an attractive option, particularly since the pandemic. One herder stated that before Covid, 'households were focused only on the centre, provinces, and cities. But now they are talking in rural areas.' Another concurred, describing his own sons, saying, 'there's a bit more rural attitude, young people'.

In addition to livestock product market dynamics and demographic changes from schooling, *dzud* disaster events have also influenced the politics and discourses around urban and rural orientations and identities. For the herders we interviewed, much of this stems from portrayals and statements about herders and disasters in the media and, since the pandemic, primarily on social media. The latter is an interesting conundrum because, on the one hand, it flattens the distinction between rural and urban through access to the internet, but on the other, it serves as a means to extend the reach of perceived rural–urban distinctions.

> There have been changes since 2000. Your herders are now improving their living environment and communication has improved. Also, since the introduction of another network, Facebook has been accessed from home, just as much as from the centre, and I have watched everything with D-Dish … Herders are no longer just rural things. (Female herder, 39, 2023)

The rising importance of social media in the post-pandemic world has had a number of effects on rural regions which we do not detail here; however, portrayals and discussions of herders and herding on social media, such as in posts or comment sections on Facebook and elsewhere, have prompted an acute awareness among the herders we interviewed that some urban residents do not have positive or empathetic feelings for those affected by events like *dzud*. Consequently, *dzud* often serves as way to frame how herders think urban residents perceive them and their livelihoods. A widely held opinion among herders is that urban residents or non-herders perceive *dzud* as the fault of herders themselves.

> They write that herders are terribly lazy and go to parties/festivals all summer long. There are people who do that, but there are also people who make

> hay and prepare fodder for their livelihood … [*dzud*] is not because of the laziness of herders, it's just nature. (Male herder, 51, 2024)

The trope of the incompetent and lazy herder is a common one that echoes Sneath's characterisation of rural orientations as inherently backward. Herders find these sentiments not only inaccurate but also hurtful, particularly when they are suffering.

> It shouldn't feel good to say these things to people who are tired now and those who are really losing their strength. It is a natural disaster. Maybe, when the weather is good, it is the herdsman's fault if he is sitting here in the field and killing his animals. Otherwise, [during *dzud*] there's no way to go anywhere. No one will let one of their animals die on purpose … Not all herders are stupid. (Male herder, 42, 2024)

These ideas also have consequences, many argued. In the wake of the most recent *dzud* events in 2024, there was substantial conversation at the national scale about how the government might help herders, including the possibility of either forgiving loans or extending the terms of those loans and delaying payments. However, there was also substantial blowback, particularly from urban residents who felt that this was unfair treatment and only helped those who had caused their own problems (Purevsuren, 2024). As one herder described, '[the government] might pay off the loans of the herders, but the people of the centre [i.e. urban people] wrote negative things against us' (Female herder, 58, 2024). At the heart of this, another herder argued, was the lack of knowledge about herding and how and why disasters unfold.

> The Mongolians have become very negative. But there is no point in denying it out of fear [of negativity], since it is because of these people [who are expressing this negativity] that all herders are being blackmailed … They don't know the way of herding animals and how the herders live. (Female herder, 49, 2024)

Urban orientations

Herders also expressed their views of urban residents. Across many interviews we heard the sentiment expressed most directly by one herder: 'Naturally, city people don't know rural life.' Many argued that urban residents are increasingly becoming detached from the realities of life on the steppe even though they recognise the connections between them. Here one herder wrestled with this problem:

> Those people in the city are also the children of herdsman families in the countryside. They are. Maybe not these young people who grew up in the city,

> but the rest of them had a rural life ... The people before 2000, are people of pastoral origin. Now, there are families where people go to the city only after going to school and then settle in the city. Before that, people did not think that the herders had such a terrible negative effect [on society]. Maybe now, right? But families that grew up in urban areas do not know rural people. (Male herder, 55, 2024)

Nevertheless, urban life for herders has come to represent a way of living and engaging with the world that is often anathema to rural values. These shifts cause them considerable concern about what urban life represents and what its consequences might be. A herder we interviewed framed this disjuncture through environmental values. He argued:

> I think that this world is [the way it is] because we have mistreated mother nature. Ulaanbaatar has built houses on the slopes of the Bogd Khaan mountain almost to the top. When Mongolians used to worship Chinggis, it is said that it was Bogd mountain that belonged to Chinggis. Yes? They say that it is a protected mountain with love and respect. If you take something that should be loved and respected as a living being and then put to it with a hard iron and dig it up, anyone would get angry. (Male herder, 43, 2023)

Though most herders framed their concerns about the connections between environmental and spiritual values through the lens of mining, here this herder is directly criticising the spatial infrastructure of the city itself as counter to traditional values, the fullest expression of which is found in the countryside. Though herders took issue with urban values and practical living, much of what they said about urban identities and orientations was directed at urban political and economic elites rather than the average resident. These elites in many ways have come to represent what the city and urban life essentially means for rural residents. And even though urban history in Mongolia is deep, interviewees target changes since the collapse of socialism. One herder directly addresses this by saying that much of what ails rural Mongolians resulted from when 'the hooligans (*khuligan*) of Ulaanbaatar came out and established the new government [after socialism]' (Male herder, 56, 2023). They identify a lack of interest in and concern for rural lifeways among these elites, evidenced, they argue, by their absence.

> I think that our problems will be solved by seeing and feeling the problems that are currently happening to those herders. Now, I think that leaders who have seen the real lives of herders are rare... the head of *soum* might be seen occasionally, but the head of the province does not go to rural areas or herders' centres. Almost every minister or president comes from the city with a group of a few, selected people and prepares for it ... Apart from that, I think

there are few politicians who can see and know what the life of a herder is like. (Female herder, 44, 2023)

Herders applied this criticism beyond politicians to other urban elites including academics, scientists, and government officials. One herder stated, referring to the lead author:

(They) should be travelling almost every day compared to you. There is no such thing. Frankly speaking, you are travelling from America at quite a cost … but we really need to talk about it with the Ministry of Agriculture. These people don't do that, though. They ask me nothing. (Male herder, 70, 2023)

Even when herders interact with politicians or other government officials, they are very clear that such events are overly performative and largely vapid, declaring it 'just talk'.

I think that our voice is not reaching (the government) … There are just a lot of meetings and conferences that take pictures. And it is not visible what kind of problems were raised and what problems were solved, what results were obtained, and what significance was achieved. (Male herder, 41, 2023)

The impression that herders get is that the government and the urban elites who occupy those positions are largely unconcerned with the development and support of pastoralism.

I think the government needs to take herding seriously. The government is investing in mining, technology and other things. But it doesn't [support us] ... Really rich people run the government. So, herding is just a kind of distraction. But they need to take it seriously. (Male herder, 40, 2023)

The sense that herding is low on politicians' lists of priorities and largely a distraction in the face of more lucrative industries, such as mining, cuts across other discourses surrounding political and economic elites and corruption. Herders most frequently described general conditions of corruption and bribery emanating from the city but, in a few cases, they were more specific. As we arrived in Khentii province in the summer of 2023, an incident was unfolding on the news involving a wealthy businessman from Ulaanbaatar who was attempting to move his horse herds across a quarantine barrier in a rural *soum* of Selenge *aimag* (Batchimeg, 2023). *Soum* officials enlisted the help of local herders to ensure that the animals remained in quarantine, but they were violently chased through the pasture by the businessman who was clearly attempting to strike them with his Toyota Landcruiser. The incident showed up in several of our interviews and it highlighted another way in which herders interact with urban elites. Incidents like these further reinforce the view of urban orientations as ones marked by corruption but also contempt for herders who are seen as an

underclass. Other incidents also involved horses, a symbol of customary lifeways but also, through horse racing, of urban elite culture. As one herder described: 'the horsemen of Ulaanbaatar come from all over the world it seems and settle right behind the family's winter camp' (Male herder, 49, 2023). Another herder echoes this, stating 'people from the city will come with horses to the place where there is little pasture … so they eat it up' (Male herder, 64, 2023).

Future orientations

Finally, herders expressed concern that the lack of governmental support, or total absence of support according to some, coupled with a changing climate and repeated disasters, might spell the end of pastoral lifeways on the steppe. With it they question what would be left of their heritage.

> I don't know how many people used to gather in this area in the past, but the settlement in the centre, in the city, is only a few years old, compared to the many years livestock herding has been passed down ... And in general, we have been herding animals for thousands of years ... [but] herders are decreasing, they are decreasing in front of our eyes. Just looking around now. And in general, the number of people who carry this nomadic civilisation with them is decreasing. I just want to carry on my heritage … (Male herder, 42, 2024)

When we asked what would happen if pastoralism was no longer viable, the herder responded with an appeal to Mongolian identity more broadly:

> In general, you can be called a Mongolian if you are a herder and a herdsman. But if it [i.e. herding] doesn't exist, it's meaningless to say it's Mongolia, isn't it? And attacking herders means attacking our heritage. (Male herder, 42, 2024)

This concern also arose in conversations about the possibility of pasture privatisation, a policy not only incompatible with mobile pastoralism in the eyes of many but also with being Mongolian.

> Mongolians cannot be separated from nomads. As for me, I'm a nomad, and if I don't travel by camel cart, I go by ox cart or horse cart... In spring, winter, autumn, yes, I move and camp. If the livestock does not do this, they will not be able to fatten and have enough energy to survive the winter of the year. Mongolia's livestock are just like that. Mongolia will be destroyed and will cease to exist if it becomes like China, and we stay in one piece of land with the livestock after fencing its pastures. (Male herder, 55, 2024)

The comparison to Inner Mongolia, which has experienced substantial transformation in both its livestock economy and culturally, is a jarring one but ever present as a real possibility. The herder continued:

> That's exactly how Inner Mongolia was made … they were nomadic Mongolians, just like us … If you say that Mongolians are Mongols without herding Mongolian cattle, it cannot be true.

The connection herders were making between a rural orientation and the future of the Mongolian nation was surprising. The forceful lure of the *khot* (city) and its promises coupled with elite desire for the *khüdüü* (countryside) as a purely extractive zone appeared overwhelming to some older herders.

Discussion and conclusion

Many of the concerns and criticisms voiced by herders above reveal an anxiety about what has become of the relationship between rural and urban lifeways and their mutuality. What was once complementary, as Gardelle and Zhao (2019) describe, appears increasingly to be in tension, though more research is certainly warranted. Livestock product markets, schooling, *dzud* disaster and political inequalities have all become axes for cultural production. To herders, it appears that they are perceived as both wealthy at the expense of others and a zone of backwardness, external to culture (*soyol*) and education. This combination results in a lack of empathy when disaster strikes as it did in the summer of 2024, since the logic conveys that it is herders' fault and/or deserved. In Bayankhutag, at least, the pandemic and the increasing use of social media have certainly ratcheted these tensions to new heights. Additional research on these dynamics might offer more clarity and insight about these effects.

Herders also recognise that a contradictory or antagonistic relationship with the city is not one they can 'win' and that the threat of the loss of pastoralism is real. In Diener and Hagen's examination of urban identities in Mongolia they found questions being raised about the future of pastoralism and its place within a modern Mongolia. They quote the poet Mend-Oyoo:

> Mongolia's transition to a market economy is shaking the foundations of traditional nomadic life. The traditions and heritage of a thousand years are being forgotten. Today both settled and nomadic civilisations exist simultaneously in Mongolia. Will they remain side by side, or will one dissolve into another? Settlement threatens the nomads. (G. Mend-Oyoo 1999: 3–4, in Diener and Hagen 2013: 643)

Mend-Oyoo situates this dual dynamic in the turbulence of the post-socialist transformation of the last thirty-plus years and laments that a distinctly rural orientation, generated through the everyday realities of pastoral production, might be giving way, much as the herders interviewed here argue. But Mend-Oyoo (1999: 3–4) continues:

> I wish the twenty-first century nomads to be well educated and intelligent. It is obvious that nomadic civilisation cannot remain as it was in the past. Why can't nomads have electricity thanks to wind generators? Why can't they have mobile phones? Why can't we improve the traditional *ger*, so it is comfortable in all seasons?

Here he sees a different pathway, one where a rural orientation is shifting in new ways. A rural orientation trapped in time can easily become a prison, much like Trouillot's 'savage slot' (see also Myadar, 2022). But if a rural orientation can adapt and negotiate change, it can discover new horizons of what it means to live in the *khüdüü* (countryside). Much of this, of course, relies on the elites and politics of the *khot* (city) – and in that case, it might behove herders to take an antagonistic stance, though maybe one that seeks complementarity rather than contradiction.

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❄ *Chapter 12* ❄

Fragile Networks: The Illusion of The Stable Job in Post-Pandemic Mongolia

Iris Pakulla

Beyond the vast infrastructure of the mine, the Gobi was pitch black; the terrace of the bar was filled with workers, music and laughter. It was noisy, creating a stark contrast to the absolute silence of the desert beyond the mine's fences, punctuated only by the occasional flicker of distant lights on the horizon. 'Those must be the trucks taking the concentrate to China', I remarked to my friend Altangerel, an electrician in his late twenties, who stood beside me. It was late summer, and the night breeze was warm and dry – a welcome relief after a day spent underground. As we chatted about life, Altangerel shared his new career aspirations. He was applying for a job that would allow him to spend more time above ground, as he had grown weary of the underground conditions. 'My wife is struggling to raise our baby without me, and she has to work to earn extra money', he explained. 'This is not a good life. If I can't be there for my daughter, if she doesn't recognise me when I come home, I should at least be able to provide for her.'

This and other encounters formed part of my doctoral fieldwork conducted among workers at the Oyu Tolgoi mine (hereafter referred to as 'OT'), the first capitalist megaproject in Mongolia located in the Ömnögovi province, over a twelve-month period from 2021 to 2022. To gain insight into current labour relations and prevailing attitudes toward work, I interviewed company and contract workers aged 20 to 45, along with former miners at the Erdenet Mining Corporation (GOK, after its initials in Russian), trade union activists and labour historians.[1] The names of current OT workers have been anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

1. The Erdenet Mining Corporation (GOK, from its initials in Russian) is a state-owned copper mine, located in the Orkhon province in the north of Mongolia. Until 2019, Erdenet was a Russian-Mongolian joint venture, as the Soviet Union and its allies owned all exploration and mining rights in Mongolia.

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My conversation with Altangerel occurred in September 2022, within the mining compound of OT, just a few months after unprecedented mass demonstrations in Ulaanbaatar's iconic Sukhbaatar Square. By then, the Covid-19 pandemic had subsided, and the void left by a very present 'state of emergency' and the onset of the post-Covid 'crisis' highlighted structural inequalities such as high unemployment and food insecurity. In April, and later in December 2022, younger generations raised their voices against corruption in the mining sector, social inequality and the state's inability to provide a 'good life' for its citizens (Sorace and Enkh-Amgalan, 2022). Protesters pointed to the unfair distribution of wealth – mostly in the hands of political elites – in a country where, despite the presence of multinational mining companies, 27.1 per cent of the population still lives below the national poverty line.

This widespread unrest, I suggest, partially stemmed from ongoing mobilisations among OT miners since 2020. During the pandemic, miners across Mongolia protested against prolonged shifts and the resultant extended separations from their families, a situation further exacerbated by frequent lockdowns and perceived exploitative working conditions that led to unfair wages. Workers, regardless of their positions within the mine, expressed a collective understanding that their earnings were inadequate – not only due to pandemic-induced price inflation and mounting debt but also because they struggled to comprehend why a Mongolian should earn significantly less than their foreign counterparts. My discussions with labour activists and union representatives highlighted the inequalities within the mine, as evidenced by the following figures.[2] As of 2022, approximately forty per cent of OT's total wage budget was allocated to foreign workers, who comprised only five per cent of the workforce, while 95 per cent of OT's employees were Mongolian. Those directly hired by OT LLC, representing around seventeen per cent of the workforce, typically received higher salaries paid in dollars. In contrast, the remaining 83 per cent of the workforce was employed by subcontractors, whose workers operated on temporary contracts that could be subject to renewal or rejection based on competitive criteria. Across these companies, wages remained significantly lower than the average salaries in Western mining operations. In this context, labour activist Onon Baasanjav, aged 36, argued: 'If the copper concentrate produced by the miners meets international standards and is therefore sold on the New York and Hong Kong stock exchanges, why are our wages so low?'

2. Personal communication with O. Baasanjav, labour activist, D. Dolgor, the Director of the Mongolian Federation of Energy, Geological and Mining Workers' Trade Unions (MEGM), former members of the OT LLC Trade Union Committee of Oyu Tolgoi LLC's Mining Employees (TUC) and OT workers in 2021 and 2022.

During the pandemic, *bid uurkhaichid* (We Miners), a Facebook group with 28,653 members as of 5 June 2024, became an important platform for mineworkers across Mongolia to share their grievances and information on labour rights. They organised online discussions, small-scale demonstrations and lobbying efforts, ultimately achieving success in prompting the state to legislate shift work. For the first time in history, shift work was regulated to a schedule of fourteen days on, followed by fourteen days off. However, the downside of this labour activism was that, while the amendment to the Revised Labour Law was widely regarded as beneficial – allowing workers to spend more time with their families – it also resulted in reduced wages due to fewer working hours. This legislative change indirectly reinforced social inequalities among mineworkers and led to the widespread post-socialist phenomenon of the further privileging of a new 'labour aristocracy', with the consequent eclipsing of temporary and contract workers (Parry, 2018: 14–15; in India see Parry, 2020 and in Kazakhstan see Trevisani, 2018). In the mine, workers navigated social stratification and job instability through the creation of what I call here 'fragile networks' as they used personal connections in the workplace to secure employment. This job insecurity must be contextualised within the aftermath of the pandemic – a socially disruptive event – and more broadly within post-socialist Mongolia. Before exploring the post-pandemic social changes, the first three sections will outline the various industrial labour regimes in Mongolia from a historical and legal perspective, highlighting how OT has supplanted the state as the country's leading employer. This approach builds on Li's (2017: 247) interpretation of labour regimes as 'material requirements ... and associated technologies, employer practices for finding and selecting workers ... reward and punishment systems, and economic and political contexts that empower workers or employers in particular ways'. This historical approach elucidates how prevailing attitudes towards work have influenced workers' agency in the present day. The second part of this chapter will then examine the labour and social changes that have emerged in and around the mine in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Work under the socialist government

Nominally, the basis of the socialist state was the working class, whose participation in all state, economic and cultural development activities was, according to the Mongolian Constitution of 1960, to be the foundation of the new society. Labour power was understood by intellectual elites as notionally 'work done without expectation of reward, without reward as a condition, work done because it has become a habit to work for the common good' (Lenin, 1965: 516 in Tkach, 2003: 168, see also Sodnomdorj, 1984). The collective agreement

(*khamtyn geree*) and the necessary conditions for workers to perform their duties were guaranteed by the Labour Law of the Mongolian People's Republic of 1973. Economic growth was to be directly achieved by increasing the efficiency of workers' production, i.e. labour productivity (Lkhamsuren, 1982: 473–474). In Erdenet, the state mine and one of the engines of the country's transformation from an agrarian to an industrial nation, accounts abound of the workers' full commitment to the development of the state and the collective project, as well as their desire for public recognition.

Particularly relevant to this chapter is the perception among Erdenet mineworkers of the workplace as a 'second home'. This view was bolstered by the state's substantial presence in all facets of public and private life, which included provisions such as housing and crèches for workers. The existence of a familial and affective sphere in factory work was deemed essential for fostering a sense of collective unity. Consequently, workers socialised with one another and their families, spending holidays together at resorts and engaging in outdoor activities, thereby strengthening their social ties. In the Soviet ideology, Tkach (2003) points to the importance of workers' emotional attachment to work processes and the factory community for the stability of the socialist system. Simon (1999: 16 in Tkach, 2003: 167) further notes that 'the workplace was the main site of social integration ... based on the ideal of a job for life, of the workplace as a "second home"'. If workers saw the factory as a 'second home' and were committed to their brigade or shop, they would be more willing to overcome production problems (Tkach, 2003: 168). The ideal of a job for life was embodied in the 'Soviet hereditary worker', representing self-discipline and high productivity; a set of acquired moral qualities passed down throughout generations. The hereditary worker belonged to the 'labour dynasties' that may have dethroned the pre-revolutionary hereditary aristocracy, but also represented a form of privileged inherited status, albeit of a much larger segment of the population.

Chimeg, a 63-year-old woman and former chemical engineer at Erdenet, also felt it was her duty to care for her brigade. As we walked through the snowy mountains surrounding Erdenet, she recounted her experience of being poisoned in the mine's laboratory. At that time, the mine was experimenting with cyanide imported from Kazakhstan. To shield other women, who were not yet mothers, from illness, Chimeg described how she 'sacrificed herself' (*ööriigöö zoliosloson*) by conducting the experiments alone. After falling ill, she chose to conceal her health condition from her supervisor and took a break to catch up on her overtime, refusing to 'make a scene' regarding her illness. Following several months and various treatments, she eventually recovered. Chimeg kept her struggles private and, ultimately, her son inherited her position at the mine. This was

not an isolated incident; many interlocutors reported facing health problems, exhaustion and family issues due to overwork (see also Bawden [1968] 2016: 406). Despite the prevailing unease and the presence of unions,[3] it is generally agreed that industrial workers did not protest or demonstrate in Mongolia, in part because of tight state control but also because the workers in Erdenet were regarded as having an elite status. Chimeg's account reveals something of the extent to which workers continued to describe the workplace as a 'second home' as well as their fear of losing their permanent job, the most valuable (intangible) possession they could pass on to the next generation. Ensuring the continuity of the family line through emotional labour is a long-standing practice among Mongolians, which grew rapidly with decollectivisation and precarity.

Labour within the market economy

'Now it's up to you, but you're on your own', remarked labour historian Nyamjav Sodnomdorj as we discussed the freedom of work and speech within the context of Mongolia's democratisation and economic liberalisation. Following the collapse of the Soviet government, the 1992 Constitution proclaimed the freedom to choose one's occupation and the right to engage in private enterprise.[4] On 14 May 1999, the first labour law came into effect. Adults began to exercise their right to work individually through labour contracts negotiated between the worker and the employer, both domestically and internationally. In this transition, Mongolian labour, which could now be bought and sold, became a commodity within the market economy. State funding for the education, socialisation and welfare of workers and their families was significantly reduced, along with incentive schemes that had previously supported workers' upward mobility within enterprises. In the eyes of citizens, the image of the state as a totalitarian caretaker institution was fading. Following the lifting of restrictions on substantial personal property ownership in 1991, work began to serve as a means for individuals to accumulate private wealth, leading to the erosion of the notion of 'work as a second home'. Building upon her study of an Estonian mine, Kesküla (2014: 72) elucidates how productivity targets, after the transition, were met through a distinct separation of 'the individual worker, guided

3. As in other socialist countries, explains Enkhchimeg (2023: 53), 'trade unions lacked independence … as they were a part of the central government bureaucratic apparatus, which acted as "transmitter" of the plans of the party'.

4. Article 16 [Citizen's Rights] 4) 'The right to free choice of employment, favourable conditions of work, remuneration, rest, and private enterprise. No one may be unlawfully forced to work' (https: //www.conscourt.gov.mn).

by the rules of the market', from 'the family, which now belongs to the private sphere of affection and reproduction'.

Following the liberalisation of the economy, government policy – shaped by foreign influence – identified foreign investment in the mining sector as essential for economic growth, treating labour as a mere means to this end. By enacting a 'democratic' labour law, the state established a legal environment favourable to international companies, facilitating investment while perpetuating cheap labour through unregulated work shifts. This 'selective absence of the state' – where the government relinquishes regulatory responsibilities to the private sector – positioned Mongolia as an attractive investment destination, enabling companies to tailor labour to productivity needs (Hatcher, 2020: 256). In the context of global capitalism, as Lazar and Sanchez (2019: 6) observe, 'national governments enforce measures of labour flexibility that allow for precarious conditions and the development of special economic zones vulnerable to exploitation'. From the 1990s onward, the Mongolian state, supported by substantial loans from the International Finance Corporation, has continuously adapted its mining regime to align with corporate objectives (Hatcher, 2020: 255).

The pandemic and the Revised Labour Law

In 2022, more than thirty years after the first democratic Labour Law, in the midst of the pandemic and miners' unrest, the Mongolian Federation of Energy, Geological and Mining Workers' Trade Unions (MEGM) stressed that most of the country's large mining companies continue to violate human rights by imposing long working shifts, which in some cases have led to fatal work-related accidents (Personal communication with D. Dolgor, MEGM director, July 2022). Despite the prevalence of infections among workers and significant logistical challenges, OT persisted in operating around the clock to advance its underground project, which only commenced operations in February 2022. Consequently, workers encountered increasingly arduous circumstances, exacerbated by the absence of legal protections against overwork and the imposition of stringent government regulations concerning isolation, testing, and movement restrictions. Prior to the pandemic, most miners adhered to a schedule of 21 or 28 days of continuous work followed by seven days off. In contrast, those residing in the nearby district (*soum*) of Khanbogd – unless employed in the underground mine – typically followed a different routine, commuting daily between their homes and the workplace. For the majority of workers, shifts were allocated unevenly, as noted by D. Dolgor. It was commonplace for miners to work overtime, frequently choosing night shifts over day shifts to manage debts associated with home purchases and their children's education. Moreover,

pregnant women often found themselves overworked and taking on night shifts, despite this practice being explicitly prohibited at OT (Pakulla, 2025).

During the pandemic, some workers, including translators and administrative staff, lost their jobs due to mine and regional lockdowns, while specialist and manual workers faced a substantial increase in their shifts, with some remaining in the mine for up to four months. Although this extended work period was often regarded as beneficial for workers' household economies, many grappled with the emotional toll of prolonged separations from their families, experiencing anxiety, fear and despair as a result.

Supported by miners and employees of OT LLC, MEGM campaigned for changes to shift work regulations and informed the Minister of Labour (A. Ariunzaya) about the detrimental effects of long shifts on health, mental wellbeing and family life leading to divorces and work–life (*ajil amidral*) imbalances. In that year, MEGM collected 3,400 signatures from company workers in a petition in favour of shift regulation. By January 2022, the Revised Labour Law introduced and legislated the 'roster shift' system for the first time in Mongolia, regulating working hours to a schedule of fourteen days on and fourteen days off. The Revised Labour Law also details 'job rotation', which allows workers to 'rotate' within the company. Job rotation is mostly done by a subcontractor to balance and equalise the workload within a department, for training purposes or to demote a worker who is 'not fit for the job' (Bayaraa and Gombojav, 2021). This rotation is also linked to contracting arrangements where OT subcontractors – around 150 at the time of writing – win and lose tenders, and hire and fire their workers.

The enactment of a Revised Labour Law in January 2022, shortly before the commencement of OT's underground mining operations, was advantageous for OT. With a workforce that rotated more frequently, the resulting 'pool of unemployed labor' (Harriss-White, 2006: 1243) also grew larger. Thus, I argue that the regulation of working shifts in Mongolia was not solely the outcome of active union involvement, but rather a convergence of various interests. Mineworkers welcomed shift work for giving them more family time; the state enhanced its position in the international market and reduced unemployment; and OT expanded its workforce through subcontracting as a strategy to mitigate future emergencies and ensure uninterrupted production targets. Nonetheless, the interests of the involved parties did not fully align.

Shortly after the enactment of the Revised Labour Law, OT LLC entered into a collective agreement with the company's workers' union, committing to regulate working days and hours at the mine, while providing company workers with benefits such as contributions to pension and savings funds, severance pay, performance-related annual bonuses, life insurance and various allowances.

However, this collective agreement applied only to the minority of the workforce who were employed by OT LLC. Without a binding agreement for contract and temporary workers, both the Mongolian state and the 150 subcontractors left the majority unprotected, failing to adequately address crucial issues such as benefits, redundancy, career development, and pension funds. Compliance with labour laws was shifted to the responsibility of each individual subcontractor. In this context, the implementation of the Revised Labour Law inadvertently reinforced inequalities, further privileging a new 'labour aristocracy' – the elite workers of OT LLC. Lacking adequate benefits, contract workers (around eighty per cent of the workforce) became increasingly reliant on support networks to secure their employment.

Post-pandemic social changes

After the long shifts during the pandemic and the subsequent reduction in working days, Gantulga, an OT LLC driver in his forties, enjoyed spending more time at home with his son and pursue his new hobby of bodybuilding. The prospect of additional personal time motivated him to contemplate quitting his job in two years, as soon as he had paid off the debts incurred from building his house on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. Having worked at the mine since 2014, he had been commuting to and from the compound for nearly a decade. As a company worker, he considered his experience in the mine 'of the best quality', enjoying privileges such as not having to share his room with other miners. Reflecting on his future, he shared:

> The best thing is to spend time with my family. I've recently built a house in the countryside and started living there, it's wonderful. We don't know how long we'll live. I could be dead in the blink of an eye. An old friend of mine who worked in the mine saved all his money until he died and never got to spend it. What did he live for?

Similarly, the pandemic prompted Batzorig, aged 44, to re-evaluate the meaning of life. Previously trained as a biologist and a Buddhist monk, he worked for OT Community Services. Following the stressful period of the pandemic, during which he developed acute heart problems, he transitioned to a five-day workweek. Now, he relished his weekends spent at home or in the countryside. For sixteen years, he had accumulated debts for his flat, car, and the education of his children. Although he nearly resigned during the pandemic, he felt trapped by his financial obligations. When we met in his office in Khanbogd, Batzorig spoke quickly and nervously about his stress: 'I had all these heart problems; my heart would suddenly race. I was afraid I would die at any moment.' To lighten the conversation, I asked how he felt now that the stressful period had ended. He

mentioned an audiobook he was listening to: 'Think Like a Monk', a bestselling self-help book focused on reducing anxiety. Looking ahead, Batzorig aspired to retire in the Khentii Mountains in eastern Mongolia and live as a farmer in a cooperative with his loved ones.

Despite Gantulga's and Batzorig's debts and anxieties, they belonged to a minority of privileged workers directly employed by OT LLC, enjoying better wages and more established careers in the mining sector. The new restrictions on working hours and shifts afforded them the opportunity to spend more time with their families, prioritise their health and envision a life free from debt (*örgüi*). In stark contrast, many of their colleagues found that wages earned during roster breaks were insufficient for living expenses, leading them to seek additional employment, such as selling milk and wild onions or assisting relatives in private businesses in Ulaanbaatar.

Meetings with less well-off miners and contract workers did not occur in offices or luxurious apartments, but rather in the 'mine impact zone'. On a spring afternoon, I met two families in a *ger* near the *soum* centre of Khanbogd; they had just slaughtered a sheep in preparation for a family reunion the following day. When I inquired about their employability at the mine, they expressed their frustrations, lamenting the unfairness of being local citizens without access to permanent jobs. A man in his thirties, holding a baby, spoke up:

> We had contracts, but that was ten years ago. But in general, it's not so nice, we go there and work only in low-paid jobs and temporary jobs. So, we have no chance of getting a better job. Few people from Khanbogd work there, most of them come from Ulaanbaatar or other provinces.

Another man recounted his experience working in an OT warehouse for three years until his contract expired. 'Everyone is waiting for a job, for the call to come. Most of us work in temporary positions rather than as main company workers. When the contract ends, we simply have to wait.' Both men were part of families that received compensation packages following the forced relocations in 2004 and 2011 (Sternberg et al., 2020: 534), which included scholarships, job training initiatives and employment opportunities within the mine. However, most of these contracts had already lapsed, resulting in a segment of the local population rotating in and out of the mine's workforce through temporary contracts. Batzorig, who maintained constant contact with these families as OT community service director, expressed alarm at the local protests that occurred at the end of the pandemic. He noted, 'They were not demanding that OT cease operations, as they had previously, but were desperately pleading for work (*bid ajil khüsch baina*).'

In addition to the locals unemployed, migrants from other provinces were also vying for employment at the mine. I encountered them during shared car journeys from Ulaanbaatar to Khanbogd. Baatar, aged twenty, who was heading to the capital to assist in his brother's garage, hailed from Övörkhangai, situated north of Khanbogd. He had worked in the geological department of an OT contractor company for nearly two years, earning one million *tögrögs* (approximately 300 USD) a month. However, when shift work was introduced, his salary was reduced to the minimum wage of 160 USD. Due to the post-pandemic price inflation, Baatar eventually quit his job, unable to support his wife and daughter on such a low income. 'I would like to get a permanent job, but without a "back door" (*aryn khaalga*), it is impossible to get in', he lamented. His statement reflected a prevalent belief among mineworkers that personal connections were essential for securing desirable employment.

In contrast, Bayar, aged 32, had successfully cultivated significant personal networks within the mine. As we sat in a shared car, beer in hand, he eagerly explained how his *akhan düüs* (male comrades) provided vital support, helping him endure the mine's harsh conditions: 'We wear the same uniform, we take the same bus; there is no difference between a leader and a soldier, or between rich and poor.' He noted that this dynamic largely depended on whether the contractor was a large company. Since the pandemic, and grateful for keeping his job, Bayar has striven to maintain a positive attitude. As we drove toward Khanbogd, he mentioned that while human desires are limitless, setting personal goals can lead to meaningful accomplishments. For instance, he dreamed of building a house like 'everyone else' and getting a nice jeep like 'a human being'. With a smile, he added, 'Maybe not a plane like the wealthy foreigners, but a jeep – that's not bad!'

For many of my interlocutors, being 'human' meant having a secure job, the opportunity to pursue their aspirations and, for some, dreaming of a future beyond the mine. The pandemic brought to light a landscape of complex and evolving class relations and labour dynamics.

OT classes of labour

It is evident that the social changes workers experienced in their lives after the new labour law underscore the inequalities emerging at OT. Class formation in the mine aligns with a global trend in post-socialist industrial work, characterised by increasing precarity, the erosion of organised labour power and the proliferation of subcontracting (Parry 2018: 14–15). As previously noted, following the enactment of the Revised Labour Law, OT LLC established a collective agreement with the company employees' trade union operating within

the framework of international governance. This agreement aimed to adhere to new regulations on shift work and to provide specific benefits; however, it applied only to a limited group of workers. Contract and temporary workers – predominantly engaged by subcontractors owned by Mongolian companies – were excluded from these benefits.

The failure of both the Mongolian state and subcontractors to address critical issues ultimately reinforced existing inequalities within the workforce. In a similar manner, Parry (2020: 40) highlights a comparable situation in a Bhilai steel plant, noting that 'through its policies and legislation, it is the Indian state that has created distinct classes of labour'. In the context of Mongolia, the regulation of shift work, along with subsequent wage reductions, has further entrenched the elite status of company workers. Moreover, under the neoliberal paradigm that promotes the outsourcing of corporate responsibility, compliance with labour laws has become the responsibility of individual subcontractors.

Regarding the latter, Onon pointed out that, after the pandemic and the new regulations, contract workers continued to work overtime, often out of necessity or due to demands from the company. In contrast, those who were protected by the collective agreement, like Gantulga, experienced greater freedom from these constraints, enjoying what he described as the 'best quality of life' as company worker – an elevated social status recognised by many Mongolians. Similarly, Nomin, an administrative clerk in her mid-forties who recently secured a direct contract with OT LLC, highlighted the privileged status of working for the mine: 'When people know that I work for OT, they treat me with respect. I'm not proud to work in the mining sector, but I am proud to work for OT.' This pride stemmed from the fact that the mine is regarded by the wider public as the leading employer in the country and a key driver of the national economy. While permanent company workers such as Gantulga and Nomin were identified as a new 'labour aristocracy', contract workers – migrants and locals from rural Khanbogd – became part of the local 'pool of unemployed labor' (Harris-White 2006: 1243). In this context, unemployment manifests either as cyclical, due to changes in subcontractors' tenders, or structural, when employment opportunities are non-existent. Consequently, a significant portion of OT's workforce remains trapped in precarious contractual relationships as contractors and subcontractors mushroom.

The distinction between classes of workers at OT hinges on the level of 'ownership of their jobs' (see also Parry 2020: 70). Permanent sector workers enjoy a degree of stability, while others face vulnerability to unemployment. Thus, the sources of inequality in Mongolia do not arise from land ownership – which is theoretically a public asset for all citzens – but from the availability of reliable employment. The 'permanent' status of company workers, which was no longer

hereditary, was largely determined by the connections and relationships they cultivated over the years. Favour-granting relations had become 'intergenerational', OT company workers explained. They could easily 'persuade' the Human Resources department to employ their children. Having demonstrated sufficient loyalty to the company, they were deemed trustworthy and, by extension, so too were their friends and family members. Additionally, some explained, their economic status allowed them to pay bribes to ensure relatives were prioritised in the hiring process at OT LLC. In my research context, 'owning a job' meant possessing the necessary contacts and nurturing relationships to secure stable positions for themselves and their relatives. Classes at OT emerged as 'processes and relationships through which people produce and acquire what they need to survive' (Carrier, 2015: 33).

Fragile networks

Without a direct contact to the mine or a 'back door' (*aryn khaalga*), 'it is impossible to get in' said Baatar, the young man from Övörkhangai, in the car back to Ulaanbaatar. By 'in' he meant a direct contract with OT, rather than with its subcontractors, whose wages were relatively low. Once employed by OT LLC having good relations in the form of *akhan/egch düüs* – terms to describe friends and relatives – was instrumental in securing the position, many told me. These concepts of relational hierarchy denote the junior-senior dynamics (Sneath, 1993: 196) among male and female workers, used either affectively or instrumentally to extend communality beyond kinship.

Enerel, aged 39, a single mother and underground instrumentalist with whom I stayed in close contact during my research, had worked at the mine for eleven years in nine different positions. When we met, she was on her tenth. Enerel had recently realised that she could not be promoted in her current department because, as she put it, 'my boss doesn't like me'. She continued to explain: 'He [my boss] got the job not because he met the requirements, but because of his contacts. I instead have spent four years in my department, working hard and proving my skills, but here relationships are more important than performance.'

This emphasis on relationships reflects the broader dynamics of the workforce, particularly in the context of indeterminacy following the disruptive effects of the pandemic. Drawing on the works of Sneath (2004) and Ichinkhorloo (2018) regarding 'networks' and 'collaboration for survival', miners began to create what I term 'fragile networks'. The introduction of legislation regulating shift work in 2022 generated further indeterminacy among less privileged mineworkers, who, as in other instances of structural change in Mongolia (Fox, 2019; Sneath, 2006, 2004, 2003; Waters, 2023), relied on these relational networks to secure

employment and income. Sneath (2004: 163) observes that with decollectivisation, collectively owned assets 'took on new values and potentials to the extent that they could be integrated into new networks of production and distribution actors'. Moreover, not only did land, infrastructure and livestock acquire new value, but friendship, kinship, and social networks also became vital resources. Ichinkhorloo (2018: 394), drawing on Tsing's concept of 'salvage accumulation' (2015), notes that wealth accumulation through survival practices, such as scrap metal collection, 'was made by elites by salvaging many economic activities and social and economic relationships formed in post-socialist Mongolia'. This 'collaboration for survival' enabled ordinary people to meet their basic needs.

Similarly, in their daily lives, workers at OT nurtured and managed economic and social relationships while controlling and suppressing their emotions, concealing health conditions and fostering positive and constructive attitudes towards one another for fear of dismissal. Unlike the socialist period and the lingering practices within the Erdenet mining regime – when lifelong jobs were typically passed down through generations, offering stability and continuity for workers and their families – the illusion of permanent employment at OT is continually undermined by market fluctuations, job rotation and unpredictable pandemics. This persistent state of 'indeterminacy,' as Lazar and Sanchez (2019: 9) describe, constitutes 'the dominant condition of precarious work in many industries, as permanent impermanence normalises ostensibly temporary contracts within regular production structures'. Indeterminacy leads to what Sanchez (2018: 235) terms 'relative precarity', defined as 'conditions and forms of employment [that] appear predictable and fixed over time but are underpinned by profound insecurity'. Reflecting on this structural indeterminacy, Enerel, who was employed by a subcontractor, shared her experience:

> He [my Mongolian team leader] keeps pushing us to work more. My contract is on a knife edge right now (*minii ajlyn geree deesen döröön deer baigaa l daa*) because I have argued with him. What happens is that sometimes I'm late for work because I'm exhausted. Sometimes I sleep only two hours, sometimes I don't sleep at all. I worry about my daughter and my situation. And talking about these problems can get us fired. People tend to hide their pain, even when it's almost unbearable.

By 'hiding their pain,' she referred to the prevalent practice within the mine of avoiding the reporting of injuries, as having a medical record or chronic condition could render workers more susceptible to being classified as 'unfit for work' and ultimately dismissed, as explained by Onon, the labour activist. Living in 'relative precarity' created anxiety among current and former OT workers as they tried to move up or out of the unemployment pool, secure their current

position and avoid being dismissed. Fear of the latter often led to acceptance of unfair working conditions, which in Enerel's account can be read as exploitative.

'It's getting worse and worse', Enerel noted. 'It wasn't like this at the beginning. Most of the managers were Australian and had no relatives', she explained. With the establishment of OT and the first democratic labour law, the capitalist work ethic based on self-reliance and self-cultivation began to take root in Mongolia. However, as foreign managers are gradually replaced by Mongolian counterparts, 'the OT culture (*OT-soyol*) is becoming the Mongolian political system', an observation she clarified as indicative of increasing nepotism. Enerel anticipated changing her position soon because she 'gets along with another manager', a relationship that could potentially disadvantage other employees. Unaware of this implication, she was optimistic about her upcoming transfer to the other department, noting that 'there are a lot of Australian workers there'. By cultivating a personal connection with the new department, she hoped to secure a position with OT LLC, travel to Australia for assignments and eventually live abroad with her daughter.

This case illustrates how the quest for better working conditions took on a new dimension as contacts were instrumentalised and monetised, what Enerel understood as the 'OT culture' merging with the Mongolian political system. This new culture, according to Enerel and many of my interlocutors, was associated with the social phenomenon of *aryn khaalga* ('back door'). Java, a 24-year-old translator employed by a subcontractor, explained: 'Only if you have a close relationship with those in power do you get special favours and unfair (*shudarga bus*) advantages and privileges.' For him, that some received privileges at the expense of others was unfair: he had lost his job during the pandemic without severance pay and worked at a construction site in Ulaanbaatar until he was recently re-employed. By way of example, Java described instances of individuals paying large sums of money for job interviews and 'nationals' arranging meetings between Mongolian women and 'expats' as forms of bribery. Rumours regarding these unfair exchanges were prevalent among my interlocutors, often conveyed in impersonal phrases like 'they say' which were deliberately vague to protect family and friends in what many perceived as a tight-knit society (of the mine) – where 'everybody knows everybody'.

This seemingly close-knit environment was experienced as a complex network of stressful relationships that imposed significant pressure on individuals. Batzorig, OT community services director, recognised that his fragile heart condition was intricately linked to this social dynamic. He understood that, in order to improve his health, he would ultimately need to leave his job at the mine. As we sat in his office, he remarked:

> It's like a forest. The trees beneath the surface are interconnected, even if we can't see it. Fungi act as messengers, transporting minerals and nutrients while also transmitting signals such as stress hormones between the trees. It's the same with people.

In his role as an intermediary between the mine's interests and those of the residents of Khanbogd, Batzorig faced not only the stress posed by his bosses and mounting debts but also a profound sense of responsibility toward the miners and herders who sought his assistance. Although he was deeply committed to supporting them – particularly the elderly – this obligation weighed heavily on him.

Trust within and outside the mine, amid prevailing precarity, was primarily built on these relationships. As Batzorig noted, 'We [i.e. Mongolians] only trust if we have some relationship with the person [through other people]. That way, if something goes wrong, we can blame our mutual friends or relatives.' This reliance on connections not only shaped the dynamics of trust but also fostered a sense of community among the workers.

To alleviate some of the stress, it was part of the new 'OT culture' (of relationships) to socialise in the mining bar and watch the sun rise over the desert, as the mineworkers told me. Especially regarding the latter, Enerel described how she felt 'real happiness' coming back to the surface after working underground and watching the sunrise with her colleagues, emphasising the emotional bonds forged in these shared experiences. Similarly, Soviet-era miners, along with their families and brigades, picked berries and organised picnics in the hills surrounding the Erdenet mine and enjoyed the weekends at the state-sponsored resort. These were moments of enjoyment and socialisation understood in terms of care; a reminder of the Soviet state, where debt did not hold back people's aspirations for life. 'Only if we were free of debt we could bloom like a flower at dawn', said Java, only in his early twenties. A life free of debt (*örgüi*) also meant a life free of relational interdependency (Wright 2009:107) amidst the precarity of the mine and Mongolian society.

Conclusion

Despite OT workers' enactment of and inconsistent adherence to the Revised Labour Law following the pandemic have profoundly impacted the social and emotional lives of workers, further contributing to the atomisation of the workforce, sharpening the distinction between company and contract workers, and exacerbating precarity within the mine. In the aftermath of the pandemic and amid rising debt, drawing on Xiang's research among Chinese private sector employees (2021: 233), OT contract workers found themselves in a state

of 'suspension': 'moving from one position to the other, conducting intensive labour, and pausing routine life – in order to benefit fast and then quickly escape'. Workers kept moving, with no end in sight, making and breaking connections, creating and remaking webs of possibilities as they engaged in a multiplicity of relationships. Their access to stable employment relied heavily on the ability to establish and depend on these stratified connections, 'spidery attachments' (Swancutt, 2012: 114), understood as practices of exploitation, reciprocity, but also trust. The image of a spider's web, in Corsín Jiménez's (2018: 53) words, offers an 'apposite metaphor for a world in precarious balance, tensed with violence and catastrophe, but also with grace and beauty'. In the unsettling indeterminacy of the mine, workers clung to the past and the future, weaving through exhaustion in search of stable employment. But these were fragile networks held in suspense, for stability in the 'age of the market' (*zah zeeliin uye*) is only an illusion.

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❄ *Chapter 13* ❄

The Role of Covid-19 in Kyrgyz Women's Lives

Zalina Enikeeva

Introduction

In 2023, together with the University of Central Asia's Institute of Public Policy and Administration's research assistant, Kanyshai Makeshova, I was conducting interviews to investigate the roles of female entrepreneurs during Covid-19 in the Osh and Issyk-Kul regions of the Kyrgyz Republic. While visiting the bazaar in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, to talk with female traders, we took a breather for tea and a snack. We found a cafe in a small shipping container with three tables. Behind the counter, a pleasant young woman was pouring tea for a customer. By the time we decided to take a break here, Dilfuza, the delightful tea lady, was preparing a table for us, as we were the only visitors. Making small talk, she noticed we were not locals and asked the purpose of our visit to Osh. When we explained that we were researchers talking with women about how Covid-19 influenced their lives, Dilfuza became visibly sad. She sat down and started telling her story. Her problems were similar to those faced by women around the world during the pandemic. Since March 2020, she had experienced gender-based violence in terms of beatings from her now ex-husband, a child's illness, personal health problems, impoverishment due to lack of education and work, debt from the ex-husband's microcredits, and many other troubles.

Sadly, Dilfuza's experience is not unique, as the effects of the pandemic continue to reverberate in the lives of many women in Kyrgyzstan. In many cases, women are the only breadwinners in their families, raising children and helping their parents financially. Often, women combine multiple jobs to support their families. Opening a small business gives some flexibility. At the same time, they are likely to have limited access to capital, insufficient skills and information, and face strict social constraints due to traditional attitudes, especially in rural areas.

This study examines the role of women entrepreneurs during Covid-19 and the role of Covid-19 itself in women's lives. It was based in Kyrgyzstan, a country where the intersection of pastoral life, agriculture and tourism creates a distinctive context for understanding the role of Covid-19 in women's lives.

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Research focused on Osh Province, a more traditional and densely populated region in southern Kyrgyzstan, and Issyk-Kul Province, a tourist-dependent region located in the northern part of the country. These regions were selected because both had difficult lockdowns and were heavily affected by border closures (along with other regions). The chapter explores the challenges women faced and acknowledges their resilience and ingenuity. Women have adapted, finding innovative solutions to sustain their businesses, families and communities during lockdown and afterwards.

Literature review

The global outbreak of Covid-19 caused structural changes in society in general and in women's lives in particular. Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, many development organisations including UN agencies, the World Bank and others, have raised the alarm regarding women and children's vulnerability (Peterman et al., 2020; Mittal and Singh, 2020; Cousins, 2020), with implications spanning health, economic stability and social issues, from increased household chores and online schooling to gender-based violence (Alon et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020). According to the OECD's Policy Responses to Covid-19 (OECD, 2020), as of April 2020, the majority of health system employees and unpaid home caregivers were women. This led to economic and social insecurity for women, who were also met with increased risks of violence, exploitation and abuse (OECD, 2020).

Kyrgyzstan lacked information or experience with pandemics. Previously, flu outbreaks involved school quarantines; Covid-19 was the first national lockdown. In spring 2020, a large influx of sick people, scarcity of medical personnel and drugs, and lack of hospital beds led to the health system's collapse and a vast number of deaths (Moldoisaeva et al., 2022). This period was popularly called 'Black July', a situation that repeated itself the following year. During this time, a third political revolution and change of government occurred in October 2020, further exacerbating the conditions in the country (Imanaliyeva and Leonard, 2020).

The turmoil caused by the pandemic and political instability significantly impacted the lives of ordinary citizens, particularly women and children. The tumult in October 2020 worsened the existing challenges in Kyrgyzstan's Covid-19 response. As the daily number of Covid-19 cases was increasing, schooling took place both in person and online (World Food Programme, 2020). The inconsistency in education meant mothers had to scramble between work, household chores, raising children and assisting them with online schooling (UN Women, 2020; Kyzy et al., 2020). Women did double the amount of childcare

and more unpaid work than men, continued employment, cared for the elderly and were responsible for household work (UN Women, 2020; UNECE and UN Women, 2021).

Along with the rise of social instability, many Kyrgyz households experienced economic insecurity. Longstanding migration to Russia for work to send remittances home was not possible during the pandemic (Miholjcic, 2021). Quarantine measures severely limited international travel; migrants risked losing both mobility and jobs, resulting in family poverty (Bruley and Mamadiiarov, 2020). According to an Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI) report by the Asian Development Bank (2020: 37), 52 per cent of Kyrgyz households experienced significant economic hardship during the pandemic, and female-headed households, those in Bishkek or Osh or without social welfare benefits, were particularly affected. Bishkek and Osh are the main urban areas in Kyrgyzstan, and lockdown measures were especially strict there. According to International Labor Organization estimates (2020: 12), the largest economic impacts were observed in the trade, transport, accommodation and food services; arts and recreation; and real estate sectors. These fields have high female labour participation (UNECE and UN Women, 2021), thus the pandemic contributed to a significant decline in their earnings. Kyrgyz women's work vulnerability was worse than in countries such as Poland (Krywult-Albańska and Albański 2021), Italy (Del Boca et al., 2020) and other countries (Ozdenerol et al., 2023).

Women's employment and household burdens are subject to strict social norms that further constrain their opportunities and autonomy. Ibraeva (2006) highlighted that Kyrgyz society is patriarchal, male-dominated and conservative, with a strong belief that the primary purpose of marriage is to raise children. As identified by Iui-Ki and Kosterina (2024), young married women, who are traditionally expected to live with their husbands' families, often face violations of their rights, abuse and prolonged exploitation. According to numerous studies, such attitudes are common across Central Asian (Turaeva, 2017; Zhussipbek and Nagayeva, 2020) and other countries (Stefanović, 2022; Ali et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, the situation worsened – gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan increased 66 per cent compared to 2019 (UN Women, 2021, p.3). Over 8,000 women appealed to crisis centres and specialised institutions for social and psychological assistance resulting from domestic violence, with a third aged 18–34 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021). Women facing domestic abuse during the lockdown did not receive any special exemptions from the strict rules and there were no reported arrests in such cases (Akisheva, 2020). According to Kulikova (2021), Kyrgyzstan's male-dominated police force has poor training, low wages and corruption, and is insensitive to gender issues. The pandemic exposed women's vulnerability to abuse, loss of

property rights and control by the husband's family (Childress, 2018; Dergousoff 2018). The country is over eighty per cent Muslim and there are many informal customs that do not confer legal rights on women (Usenov, 2022).

In essence, the first consequences of the pandemic made clear that 2020 was particularly difficult for Kyrgyz women, affecting them economically, socially, psychologically and physically. Despite this, there is little information on how working women and female entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas, coped, adapted and found opportunities during and after the lockdown. Research from other countries, such as Pakistan (Afshan et al., 2021) and Indonesia (Rahayu et al., 2023), shows that women faced similar challenges, balancing work, family responsibilities and patriarchal systems, while adapting through the use of digital tools to sustain their businesses. This study focuses on Kyrgyz women, particularly those residing in rural agricultural areas. The research aims to address the significant knowledge gap by exploring how they dealt with the pandemic, identified new opportunities and adapted to changing realities, providing critical insights to inform future policy and support initiatives.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on women in Kyrgyzstan, combining desk-based research with field trips and interviews. The study focused on women in both urban and rural areas. Fieldwork in the Osh and Issyk-Kul regions, conducted in June 2023, centred on women in agriculture and tourism. Desk research, including a review of literature and reports, helped identify socio-economic and gender dynamics during the 2020–2021 pandemic and highlighted research gaps.

In-depth interviews were a key component of the qualitative methodology, involving women affected by the pandemic, experts working with women and representatives from international organisations and local authorities. Using snowball sampling, 62 women (entrepreneurs, experts, and state employees) were interviewed, with the majority being ethnic Kyrgyz, followed by Uzbek, Russian, Korean and Dungan participants. Respondents averaged 41 years old (ranging from 18 to 65), with an average of three children each. Additionally, five men working on gender-related issues – three from international organisations and two from state authorities – were also interviewed. Table 13.1 provides a breakdown of respondents, distinguishing the responses of government officials focused on social protection from those of other organisations supporting women.

Each respondent was asked semi-structured, open-ended questions. Two questionnaires were developed. One was for women in urban and rural areas who had a business or were employed (especially in agriculture or tourism) in

March 2020. The survey covered topics such as social and economic activities before, during and after the Covid-19 lockdowns, income sources, business strategies to stay afloat, the impact of the October 2020 political revolution on income, unpaid domestic work and gender-based violence.

The second questionnaire targeted experts working with women, including those from international organisations like KOICA (Korea), GIZ (Germany), USAID (US), Helvetas (Switzerland); Kyrgyz associations such as AgroLead, Youth of Osh and the Association of Women's Communities of Issyk-Kul; as well as civil servants in social protection roles. The questions focused on the challenges women faced during the 2020 lockdown, how they overcame them, and whether they received any assistance or state support.

Table 13.1. The breakdown of respondents by region.

Employment	Osh region		Issyk-Kul region	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Experts (people working with women)	10	2	5	1
State authorities responsible for social assistance	5	1	4	1
Female entrepreneurs/ working women	26	0	12	0
Total	**41**	**3**	**21**	**2**

Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city in the fertile Fergana Valley, experienced a strict lockdown from March to May 2020. The Osh Region is known for its natural beauty and households generally rely on farming and tourism. In Alay District (Gulcho, Sary-Oy, Kyzyl Oy – 96 kilometres from Osh) and Chon-Alay District (Daroot-Korgon, Sary-Mogol, Jar-Bashy, Kyzyl-Tuu – 288 kilometres from Osh), 26 interviews were conducted with women entrepreneurs in areas such as fruit and vegetable sales, marketing, small farming, education centres, bakeries, hotels, tourism, teaching and social work. Therefore, the research included participants from Osh City, an urban area, as well as from the Chon Alay and Alay districts of the Osh Region, which are more rural areas.

The second field site was Issyk-Kul Region, located in the Western Tianshan Mountains and home to the world's fourth-deepest lake. The region is renowned for its sun and beach tourism, particularly among visitors from elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan and neighbouring countries (Jenish, 2017). Fieldwork was conducted in Karakol city, neighbouring Yrdyk village, the towns of Barskoon and Bokonbaev, and the villages of Tamga, Tosor and Kadji-Say on the southern shore of the lake. The area's main activities are agriculture and summer tourism. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with owners of guest houses, hotels

and educational centres, social workers, gastrotourism operators, fruit and berry sellers and a craft heritage centre co-owner.

Being a local female researcher helped me convey the key messages of the study's relevance and allowed me to build rapport, even when addressing sensitive questions. For example, questions related to gender-based violence were not asked directly. Instead, the question was framed as, 'Do you know anyone among your close friends, relatives, or neighbours who was exposed to gender-based violence during the lockdown?' This approach alleviated the pressure on women who may not have wanted to speak about their own experiences directly, allowing them to focus on reporting facts of abuse. Male state officials were curious when I explained that my research focused on women during Covid-19. They questioned why the study focused solely on women, noting that 'men suffered during Covid-19 as well'.

Before conducting interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, with anonymity and confidentiality assured. To protect privacy, all respondent names have been changed in this article. The research adhered to ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and privacy. Two female researchers, the author and Kanyshai Makeshova, research assistant from the Institute of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Central Asia, conducted the data collection, in-depth interviews and analysis.

Pandemic impacts on women: Common themes from Osh and Issyk-Kul

During the lockdown, urban women in Osh City and Karakol faced severe challenges, while those in rural Osh Region and Issyk-Kul were less affected. The primary income sources in both regions included pensions, salaries from remote workers (working from home) and those who continued working despite the lockdown (e.g., state and municipal workers, bank employees, medical staff), as well as agricultural producers, particularly rural landowners. Most respondents reported illness in 2020/2021 or the loss of a family member due to Covid-19, with only a few having no-one sick in their family. Ninety-five per cent reported shortages of medical drugs and supplies, as well as difficulties accessing medical services and hospitalisation. The aftermath of Covid-19 included fatigue, breathing difficulties, pneumonia and hair loss, with many lingering effects for those who had been ill. Some respondents resorted to non-traditional treatments after unsuccessful recovery attempts, such as drinking a mixture of baking soda and water or *kymyz* (fermented mare's milk). One individual even claimed that a mixture of vodka and marijuana helped remedy the disease or its consequences. All interviewees faced challenges with online schooling, and reports of gender-based violence increased during the pandemic.

Violence

The global increase in violence towards women and children during lockdowns was particularly challenging for women in Kyrgyzstan, who faced obstacles such as fear of contacting the police or helplines, the closure of shelters and crisis centres, and travel restrictions that hindered relocation to safer places (Akisheva, 2020). Responses in both regions confirm that the intensity of violence towards women and children increased during lockdown and thereafter. This growth was especially apparent in the Osh Region. Nurzada, a 42-year-old digital marketer, who helps women in digital promotion of their services, said that 'There was a lot, a lot of violence. Before, those men worked, and then bam! they had to be always at home … This problem has become acute.'

During the lockdown in Osh, Dilfuza's husband began beating her and their four-year-old child because of their son's constant crying and tantrums – these all made Dilfuza's husband angry. With their four children – two of school age and two very young – the physical and psychological abuse resulted in their son developing epilepsy, requiring medication that Dilfuza could not afford. She herself suffers from a goitre. 'People always tell me how good I look, how well-fed I am', she says. 'But the truth is, I'm sick. I have a thyroid problem that can only be treated in Bishkek.'

The social worker at the crisis centre in Osh city (Kantaje, aged 40) confirms the growth of violence during those days: 'During Covid-19, the percentage of violence was high. But even now it has not decreased much.' She continued, 'now, women can go out and talk, complain to someone. But many can't even talk about it, can't call the police. This is all connected with our mentality. It's a shame to talk about violence openly.'

Madina, a 33-year-old entrepreneur from Bokonbaev village in the Issyk-Kul region, said that, for many women in her community, it's easier to admit their husbands are cheating than to admit they are being beaten. 'That is shameful', she said. She divorced her husband after he beat her a second time. 'After the first time, I thought about our two small children – how would they live without their father? After the second time, I realised I had to divorce him for their psychological health.' Now, she believes it was the right decision. 'I heard he remarried and divorced again for the same reason – he raised his hand to his wife.' We found that Madina's decision to divorce is uncommon, especially in rural areas. According to a social worker, 'In villages, women are simply silent about violence, so we don't know the real situation. But in cities, women talk about it a little bit.'

As the findings reveal, gender-based violence is a widely recognised issue, yet many women continue to endure it in silence. The level of openness regarding

this issue remains limited, regardless of whether women live in urban or rural areas. Box 13.1 highlights the tea seller Dilfuza's pandemic story.

Box 13.1: Dilfuza's story.

A year after the lockdown, Dilfuza's husband left her and their four children after twelve years of unofficial 'marriage', as their Muslim Nikah ceremony was not recognised by the state. Without a marriage registration, Dilfuza cannot receive alimony from her ex-husband for their children's maintenance. She was also refused social benefits as an economically disadvantaged person because her father, with whom she lives, owns a car.

Dilfuza's ex-husband was previously married with two children for whom he does not pay alimony. Dilfuza, now 29, was married at fifteen, and has a secondary level of education. She never worked but now has to. First, she made bread at home at night to sell in the bazaar. Preparing food with her father, she earned 600–700 *som* ($8) a day. Now she lives with her four children, father, brother and his family with four children – in total, twelve people share space. Only she and her brother work, while her brother's wife takes care of the children, and her father is a pensioner. Her brother is a private taxi driver, earning up to 1000 *som* ($12) per day. Together, this is not enough to support their big family.

A month before our interview, Dilfuza took a loan for 50,000 *som* ($600) and opened her eatery where she sells tea, coffee, *samsy* and cakes (made by her). Currently, she earns 3,000–4,000 *som* ($36–48) per day, but the lion's share is eaten up by expenses (rent, food, supplies etc.). In addition, her husband had an unpaid loan for 180,000 *som* ($2,100) in her name. When he deserted the family, Dilfuza's father had to sell his sheep to repay the loan.

As Dilfuza told her story, she became increasingly mournful. Describing how difficult her current situation is, she started crying. Her difficulties include the loans, her and her child's sicknesses and inability to afford treatment, and the fact that she has to work twelve hours per day. She has a one-hour bus ride to start work at 6:00 a.m., allowing her to serve tea, coffee and bakery items to the bazaar customers. After calming down, she added that she tries to keep her children out of solving adult problems and encourages their studies. 'The main thing for me is that they study, I want them to get a proper education and not face the problems that I had to face', she added, wiping away her tears.

Soon a frequent customer came in. 'Dilfuza, are your delicious *samsy* ready? Those ones with meat. Oh, good. Give me two … no, three *samsy*, please. And green tea. Hot green tea, of course', said the smiling 45-year-old man, rubbing his rough hands. 'How are you doing, Dilfuza? How are your kids?' – the customer continued asking questions. 'Everything is alright', she answered him kindly.

It was time for us to go. Walking through the bazaar, the feeling of grief did not leave us – those things that we heard from Dilfuza are not exceptions in modern Kyrgyzstan, unfortunately.

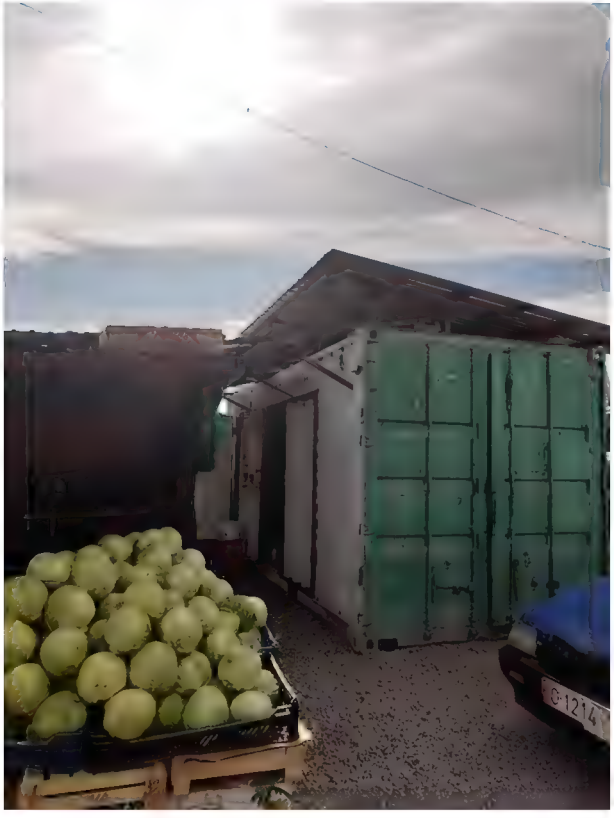

Figure 13.1: The iron container where Dilfuza's tea-point is based, at a local bazaar in Osh city. Photo by the author.

Sources of income

According to respondents in both regions, the primary source of money during the quarantine was savings. Those who relied on daily earnings from activities such as trade, services or construction were left without an income. It was common for people to buy goods on credit from small shops (Informational Agency (IA), 24.kg, 2020). Older female respondents mentioned pensions as another key source of income, which enabled them to financially support their children who had lost their jobs.

Respondents from state authorities reported that social benefits were provided to poor and/or large families, as well as people with disabilities. However, many interviews with women revealed that the only emergency assistance from the state consisted of humanitarian supplies, such as vegetable oil, flour, sugar and pasta. Some respondents criticised the quality of the food baskets, noting that the flour distributed as part of Uzbekistan's humanitarian aid packages had been stored so long that it was infested with worms (Interview with experts working with women, June 2023). Conversations in both regions revealed that aid from businesses, civil society, international organisations and concerned citizens was far more substantial and essential than government support.

'I am a pensioner, and I received some in-kind benefits from the government', 64-year-old Samira from Issyk-Kul Region said. 'It was a standard product set: vegetable oil, pasta, sugar, groats. But that was the only time. Aid from concerned (ordinary) citizens was more substantial, including a greater variety and quantity of products.'

Thus, during the quarantine, savings were the primary source of income for most, with those reliant on daily earnings left without financial support. While state authorities reported that they provided social benefits to vulnerable groups, many women indicated that government aid was limited to basic food supplies, which were sometimes of poor quality, reflecting the general lack of state capacity.

Online schooling

Female respondents with schoolchildren recalled the challenges of online education. Asel, a 47-year-old guesthouse owner and mother of three daughters from Issyk-Kul, shared, 'I had to sit with my children and help with homework until around 12 or 2 a.m. every night.' Many teachers struggled to operate computers, let alone using Zoom and other online educational tools. 'Teachers just sent tasks and topics to the pupils that they had to learn on their own. And I helped my daughters to understand the topic, and Googled the related information. I had to remember my own school curriculum. It was a hard time', Asel explained.

Distance learning in Kyrgyzstan took place from 8 April to 30 May 2020. Officially, students could access lessons through online platforms, three national TV channels and two mobile apps for free (UNICEF, 2020). However, many faced difficulties due to a lack of access to computers, mobile phones or reliable internet. This digital divide hit rural and economically disadvantaged areas the hardest, where TV and internet coverage are poor. Gulipa, a 48-year-old teacher from Chon-Alay, taught students in person at her home because internet issues made online learning impossible. 'There were such big problems with the internet connection, Zoom didn't connect, so we used WhatsApp and even just messages, but only active pupils participated', she said. 'Many didn't connect at all and had no interest in the lessons. Even my own children couldn't retain the new topics taught them by other teachers.'

As seen from the interviews, women in all regions faced similar challenges during and after the lockdown. These difficulties included increased household responsibilities, experiences of both mental and physical abuse, struggles with remote learning, the inability to go outside (particularly for urban residents) and a slow economic recovery (especially in rural areas). However, when asked about opportunities that arose due to the Covid-19 outbreak, interviewees from different regions offered diverse and unique responses, reflecting the varying impacts of the pandemic on their lives and communities.

Opportunities and challenges in Osh region

In several interviews, experts and female respondents indicated that Covid-19 brought not only difficulties but also new opportunities. Mila, a 48-year-old hotel owner in Osh, who previously accommodated mostly international tourists, was left without guests during the pandemic. To earn a living and pay the salaries of the hotel staff, she and her staff began preparing lunchboxes for the employees of state authorities, medical staff and others quarantined at the hotel. Later, she expanded her business by selling lunchboxes to local supermarkets. This continued until the hotel business recovered in 2021 when the borders reopened. Another woman, Ainura, 31 years old, also started cooking lunchboxes during the pandemic and, over time, the business evolved into a catering service. Now, she and her husband own a successful confectionery shop with branches in two regions: Osh and Jalal-Abad.

According to respondents (experts working with women such as female entrepreneurs), participating in educational programmes provided by international organisations such as USAID, Helvetas, KOICA, AKDN, GIZ, JICA and others enabled women to gain or improve the knowledge needed to start their own businesses. Interviews with members of these organisations revealed that, as projects with farmers moved online, women were able to join, learn

new material and develop skills. Female farmers discovered, through online resources, that they could cultivate fruits and berries for higher profits and sell them via social media. They learned to create social media pages (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Lalafo Marketplace), target audiences, promote products on online platforms and earn money directly. Products were sold online and distributed through local shops and courier services, with delivery to remote areas becoming very popular during the pandemic. Programmes like Accelerate Prosperity opened new opportunities for launching startups, expanding businesses and identifying market gaps and possibilities.

Nurzada, the digital marketer from Osh mentioned in the section on violence above, found her mission during the pandemic. She now offers consulting services to women in Kyrgyz and Russian, focusing on social media promotion. She teaches the basics of social media marketing (SMM), digital tourism product promotion and other digital skills. Her clients are women who want to sell their products or manage social pages for businesses, creating content, shooting photos and videos for Instagram and TikTok and handling media inquiries – all while working remotely. Demand for her courses is growing, as women, Nurzada notes, 'prefer to stay in Kyrgyzstan and work remotely, earning money without leaving their children with relatives'.

'There is no work, and labour migration is the only possible solution to earn a satisfactory amount of money', 46-year-old seller Nurzat told us at the fruit and vegetable bazaar in Osh. Almost every respondent we interviewed either planned to migrate, had recently returned from migration or had close relatives who were migrating. The word 'migration' came up in nearly every conversation. However, it was encouraging to see that some women had found an alternative to emigration, earning money through online tools instead.

Thus, the citizens of Osh Region faced numerous challenges during the pandemic, including increased gender-based violence, loss of income sources, and difficulties with online schooling. However, positive outcomes emerged, particularly for rural women, who started actively participating in earning income, making decisions and applying new skills and knowledge in practice, all while managing household chores, raising children and caring for elderly relatives.

Opportunities and challenges in the Issyk-Kul region

The southern shores of Lake Issyk-Kul and the Issyk-Kul Region (population 544,400) are less populated than the Osh Region (population 1.49 million) (NSC KR, 2024). Locals recall the pandemic as a challenging time. In addition to movement restrictions and shortages of medical supplies and hospital beds, residents faced economic uncertainty. Those reliant on external tourism were particularly hard hit. Interviews revealed that 2019 had been a successful year for

international tourism, and 2020 was expected to be even better. Many residents had taken loans to expand or upgrade rental properties for the upcoming season. When the pandemic began, they hoped borders would reopen for tourists from Russia, Kazakhstan and beyond. By August 2020, however, it became clear that those hopes were dashed, leaving locals in a panic over how to repay their debts.

In March 2020, Yulia, a 58-year-old guest house owner in Kaji-Say, faced significant challenges due to fears about repaying her loan of 500,000 *som* ($7,194). While state authorities rescheduled debt payments for two or three months, they did not cover interest payments. She also had debts to construction material suppliers who sold materials on credit, leading to intense anxiety over potential defaults. Fortunately, in their small community, everyone knew one another and local authorities helped her secure a zero-interest loan through the Development Fund of Issyk-Kul Region. This enabled her to pay off her debts and complete additional construction to accommodate internal tourists, mostly from Bishkek, who were escaping city life during Covid-19. In 2021, the number of tourists increased, allowing her to expand further in 2022.

Yulia's case is somewhat unique, as her guest house operates year-round, allowing tourists to stay at any time of year. Meanwhile, Aizhan, aged 65, has been operating a yurt camp in Tosor during the summer for the past 22 years. The camp is on the southern shore of Issyk-Kul, renowned for its tranquility. The camp is vegetarian, alcohol-free and lacks a disco, making it less appealing to Kyrgyz visitors in 2020. Without customers, the camp staff survived by collecting apricots from trees and selling them to companies that came to their village with refrigerators. 'Everyone collects fruits in the village', says Aizhan. 'Thanks to apricots, we managed to earn some money to cover our basic needs that summer.' In August 2020, when it became clear that the tourist season was over, Aizhan took down all the yurts, dismissed the staff and returned to Bishkek for the winter. However, in 2021, her regular guests returned from abroad for the annual music festival, and that summer season went relatively smoothly. 'Thank God, in 2021 I had some money to pay salaries to my staff, whom I hire from among the local people for the summer season', she smiled.

Several heads of associations working with women in the Issyk-Kul region noted that women in rural areas have become less involved in community life. In Kyrgyzstan, participation in community life is usually referred to as 'civil activism'. Instead, they are eager to start businesses, open small companies and earn a higher income. The hopelessness caused by the pandemic has led them to realise that they cannot rely on the government and must depend on themselves. In Karakol, I met Gulyasym, a 70-year-old woman, at a local NGO that provides consulting services to rural women. She received advice on how to open a beauty salon in her village of Kurbu. Excited yet somewhat bewildered,

this was her first experience starting a business. Gulyasym explained that she decided to support her daughters, who are in labour migration in Russia, as her grandchildren live with her. Pensions and remittances are insufficient to make ends meet. 'So, I decided to open a business in my old age. I don't know what will come of this, let's see', she added.

Continuing the theme of labour migration, Madina from Bokonbaev village, who divorced her husband due to violence (mentioned in the section on violence above), shared that leaving for work abroad is a common story in the Issyk-Kul region, whether as couples or individuals. She even considered working in Russia while her children stayed with her parents. 'But I couldn't leave my children. Of course, I would earn more if I were to migrate rather than staying here and starting my own business. But big money won't replace me, no one can replace a child's mother.' Instead of immigrating, Madina took out a microcredit loan and opened a small educational centre in Bokonbaev village in 2021. The centre offers English and Russian language courses, mathematics and mental arithmetic for school-aged children. 'I see those children, whose mothers have left for migration, and they stay with their grandparents. Yes, these children have money, and they can buy everything they want. But I see their sad eyes. And these kids are in dire need of hugs', she said with sadness.

Overall, the tourism sector in the Issyk-Kul region faced significant challenges in 2020, resulting in considerable economic hardship for local residents. The pandemic not only disrupted the flow of tourists but also exposed the government's inability to respond swiftly and effectively to the pressing issues arising from the crisis. Despite these setbacks, women in the region demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness.

Discussion and conclusion

The data shows that all the challenges women in Kyrgyzstan faced before the Covid-19 pandemic only intensified during it. The increase in gender-based violence, excessive demands on women for traditional domestic and caring duties, dependency on migration and the search for sources of income only exposed their financial and social vulnerability. Additionally, female entrepreneurs faced a further set of difficulties on top of these existing issues: they had to figure out how to save their businesses, earn a living for their families and provide financial support to their employees. Women in Kyrgyzstan experienced the increased burden of unpaid work – they spent three times longer than men on unpaid work and twice as much time on childcare. Additionally, women were actively involved in helping their school-aged children with their online classes. Teachers, often older, struggled with online platforms, so women stepped in.

This rise of unpaid burdens affected women's ability to participate fully in the formal labour market, increasing dependency on men and their relatives and strengthening the patriarchal role of men (Ibraeva, 2006).

Restricting people to their houses, lack of confidence in the future and the realisation that women have nowhere to go freed the hands of many men, and the country endured the growth of gender-based violence. Aggression grew after lockdowns (Akylbekova, 2020). Perhaps always high in number, with social media's prevalence, these cases are being covered more often. In rural areas, the topic of gender-based violence is more censored than in urban areas; the residents' explanation of this is 'mentality' and 'shame' – a very familiar concept for Central Asia (Werner, 2009).

Starting a business in rural parts of Kyrgyzstan can be tough for women because of strict gender roles, culture and traditions. Women may find less time and opportunity to launch their own enterprises since they need to manage both work and household responsibilities. Secondly, women often struggle to obtain the necessary resources, such as capital, information, land and knowledge. With the possibility of participating in educational programmes newly available online, women took the initiative to open businesses, especially in pastoral areas, which indicates hopeful changes.

Despite having common issues related to business, each region had its own specific problems and solutions. In Osh, where the densely populated areas faced a tough lockdown along with the capital Bishkek, some women demonstrated entrepreneurial spirit as seen in the examples above. The shift to online educational programmes enabled women to access valuable knowledge, empowering them in various fields, particularly in agriculture. They learned to market products through social media platforms and focus on profitable agricultural products.

In Issyk-Kul, residents on the tourist-reliant southern shores of the lake faced economic uncertainties during the pandemic. However, innovative solutions emerged. Transferring to catering for internal tourists and selling fruits, particularly apricots, sustained businesses. In villages, women formed groups offering cleaning and cooking services, demonstrating their adaptability.

The pandemic highlighted both opportunities and challenges, as well as the barriers that female entrepreneurs face. Studying the struggles and opportunities for women will help policymakers and stakeholders support women entrepreneurs and promote equality. Understanding the possibilities available to female entrepreneurs can help identify areas for growth and innovation, leading to economic development and job creation. Overall, research on the opportunities and challenges faced by female entrepreneurs is crucial for promoting gender equality and empowering women.

In conclusion, the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic were felt universally by women across different regions, displaying increased household burdens, economic challenges and limited opportunities for mobility. However, the experiences of women in Osh and Issyk-Kul regions reflect a resilience and ingenuity that led to the discovery of unique opportunities during and after the lockdown. The pandemic made things start to change. Women showed they could bounce back from tough times, adjust to new situations, and actively look for chances to improve. The stories shared in this study highlight how important it is to support women in starting businesses, improving access to education and enabling women to combine several roles: wife, mother, daughter-in-law and entrepreneur. This way, women can better handle challenges and make society stronger after major global problems.

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❄ *Chapter 14* ❄

Conspiracy Theories and Public Discontent in Central Asia: The Role of Sinophobia in Mobilising Societal Frustrations

Kemel Toktomushev

Introduction: Understanding conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have long captivated global audiences, from speculations about the moon landing to notions of shadow governments and the Illuminati. In post-Soviet Central Asia, such theories are no exception. However, they should not be dismissed merely as entertainment or idle speculation. Their importance lies in the way they shape political and social landscapes in the region. As noted by scholars like Heathershaw (2012), conspiracy theories may not fit neatly into conventional social scientific research frameworks, yet they offer profound insights into the political ideas and prevailing culture of their time. These theories often reflect deeper societal concerns and anxieties, influencing public discourse and political behaviour.

A significant context in which conspiracy theories surface in Central Asia is around the region's natural resources. Resource extraction, particularly mining, plays a pivotal role in the economies of Central Asian states like Kyrgyzstan. However, it also fuels tensions between local communities and foreign investors, especially when anti-foreign narratives converge with resource nationalism. The rich mineral deposits in remote regions, such as Naryn in Kyrgyzstan, have become flashpoints for conflict, with conspiracy theories about foreign exploitation, particularly targeting Chinese companies, exacerbating these tensions.

Conspiracy theories are narratives that explain significant events as being secretly planned and executed by an individual or a group of individuals. Conspiracy theories in Central Asia generally revolve around two dominant themes: the 'deep state' and the 'foreign threat' (Heathershaw, 2012; Laruelle, 2012; Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012). The concept of the 'deep state' involves conspiratorial narratives focused on internal state affairs, such as the inner workings of ruling clans, security services or powerful presidential families. This perspective portrays

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local elites as all-powerful, omnipresent actors who mastermind their goals and achieve them covertly (Heathershaw, 2012; Michaels, 2018; Butter et al., 2024). In contrast, the concept of a 'foreign threat' implicates the involvement of external actors in domestic affairs. These external actors often include 'the usual suspects' such as the USA, Russia, George Soros and the Freemasons. Historically, Russia plays a central role in the 'foreign threat' conspiracy theories of Central Asia (Heathershaw, 2012; Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012; Allison, 2008). This can be readily understood by considering the historical dominance of Russia in Central Asia, which has led to the persistent belief that Russia continues to exert both overt and covert control over its former periphery.

While these narratives often lack verifiable truth, their power lies in their ability to shape perceptions and influence discourse, performing a dual role of both challenging and reinforcing the existing political order. Thus, conspiracy theories serve various purposes, including legitimising existing power structures, discrediting opposition and manipulating facts to achieve political goals (Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012). As Douglas et al. (2019) underlined, conspiracy theories are far more than trivial notions; they fulfil various psychological, social and political needs, often shaped by personality traits and complex motivations. These theories significantly impact individuals and societal institutions, with both risks and potential benefits that demand serious attention.

Thus, this study focuses on how conspiracy theories mirror the political, social and cultural environments from which they emerge, acting as windows into the collective anxieties of specific communities. In particular, we explore how the 'foreign threat' theory concerning China has contributed to tensions and hostilities in Kyrgyzstan's mining sector, especially in the Naryn region, where resource nationalism and anti-Chinese sentiment have fuelled clashes between local communities and Chinese mining companies.

Despite Naryn's rich gold reserves, the region remains one of the most remote and economically disadvantaged in Kyrgyzstan. While most locals rely on pastoralism and livestock for their livelihood, they have emerged as vocal critics of Chinese economic involvement. This culminated in violent clashes, halting mining operations. Conspiracy theories played a significant role in this unrest, serving as a vehicle for local fears and anxieties, as well as dissatisfaction with broader political and economic conditions.

Navigating local grievances and global power struggles in Naryn

Conspiracy theories are undeniably challenging to substantiate and, in many cases, they appear far-fetched. Nevertheless, it's crucial to understand that conspiracy theories are not primarily concerned with notions of truth or falsehood.

Instead, their significance lies in their capacity to impact the discourse. As they become integrated into the broader discursive landscape, they begin to exert influence on various actors, both official and unofficial (Heathershaw, 2012: 611). Conspiracy theories are essentially performative acts that exist within the discursive milieu (Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012: 561; Sakwa, 2012). They represent a form of political discourse that ostensibly challenges the established order in a constative sense by making specific claims against the establishment (Yurchak, 2006, Heathershaw, 2012).

However, in the performative sense, they often paradoxically serve to normalise the existing status quo by deploying and perpetuating prevailing political ideologies (Yurchak, 2006). Yurchak (2006) demonstrates this phenomenon through his analysis of Soviet political culture and how the performative dimension of the 'authoritative discourse' became a ritualised, routinised set of actions disconnected from the original meanings of political symbols. Soviet citizens, although expected to publicly support the regime, developed a complex and differentiated relationship with the state's ideology – at times rejecting, reinterpreting, or creatively engaging with official meanings (Yurchak, 2006: 28–29). For example, Yurchak referred to 'stiob', a specific type of irony under Brezhnev, which disrupted the meanings within the authoritative discourse and at the same time played a stabilising role in the political system by easing the tension created by the paradox through humour. Such phenomena paradoxically preserved the regime's form while simultaneously enabling individuals to create spaces for alternative identities and personal meanings.

Hence, conspiracy theories serve numerous functions, ranging from legitimising the prevailing order to empowering those in authority to deflect critical attention, discredit opposition and manipulate alternative facts for their own political objectives. However, in this study, the primary focus is on examining conspiracy theories as mirrors reflecting the social and cultural contexts in which they originate. These narratives not only challenge the established order but also illuminate the prevailing fears and anxieties of a specific community, shedding light on the existing power dynamics and collective narratives within that society. An in-depth exploration of the Chinese 'foreign threat' conspiracy theory serves as a particularly illustrative case in point.

Accordingly, this chapter explores how conspiracy narratives combined with resource nationalism and anti-Chinese sentiments created a volatile mixture of tensions and hostilities in the Naryn region of Kyrgyzstan. Our case study examines the events that transpired in this remote region between 2019 and 2020. Our joint University of Central Asia and University of Oxford research team conducted comprehensive fieldwork, visiting fifteen localities affected by mining activities in the Ala-Buka, Chatkal and Naryn areas. During these visits,

we conducted interviews with a total of 262 individuals, encompassing local residents, civil society leaders, government officials and representatives from Chinese mining companies.

While this chapter primarily focuses on the perspectives of local residents to illustrate the prevailing attitudes toward conspiracy narratives and resource nationalism, the broader scope of our fieldwork included interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. These included civil society leaders, government officials, and representatives from Chinese mining companies. The purpose of interviewing these other categories of people was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the local dynamics and to compare how different groups perceive and respond to the tensions surrounding mining activities, resource nationalism and anti-Chinese sentiments.

Although home to a significant gold field with estimated reserves of nearly twenty tonnes, the Naryn region is one of the most remote and economically disadvantaged areas in Kyrgyzstan (Kaktus Media, 2019). Local communities predominantly rely on high-pasture pastoralism and livestock raising, with some villagers engaged in artisanal mining, and they have become some of the most vocal critics of Chinese economic involvement in the region. This culminated in a violent skirmish between local communities and Chinese workers, leading to a complete halt of mining operations in the region. Horror stories about the Chinese 'bogeyman' served as both a pretext and a potent catalyst, enabling discontented individuals to voice their dissatisfaction. In other words, conspiracy theories exposed the fears and anxieties at large in this particular community, laying bare the power dynamics and collective narratives that werealready at work there.

In 2012, China's Zhong Ji Mining secured a licence to explore specific sections of the gold field in Naryn, known as the Solton-Sary gold field, estimated to contain approximately eleven tonnes of gold. The Solton-Sary mine is located on pastureland used by residents of Emgekchil, Min-Bulak, On-Archa and Naryn City. Zhong Ji Mining had plans to construct a gold processing plant by 2020 and commence gold extraction. However, on 5 August 2019, anti-Chinese protests erupted at the mine, swiftly escalating into a mass fight between local villagers and Chinese workers (France 24, 2019; Bacchi, 2019). What initially appeared as a temporary work stoppage ultimately resulted in the project's complete abandonment, as Zhong Ji Mining opted to fully discontinue its operations in Kyrgyzstan.

For those familiar with the global mining industry, the story of Solton-Sary is not a new one. Anti-Chinese sentiments in connection with extractive industries are prevalent worldwide, from Kyrgyzstan to Peru (Crawford and Botchwey, 2017; Aquino, 2019; Kindzeka, 2019; Hui and Bermúdez Liévano,

2019). Much as in Naryn, these sentiments are often expressed in conspiracy theories and ethnonationalist narratives, with Chinese investors becoming targets for the ire of local communities. In reality, though, when one investigates the history of Chinese mining in Central Asia, persistent issues revolve around environmental concerns, employment and social benefits, profit sharing, the roles of local and central authorities, mining practices and public access to data in the extractive sector (Sternberg et al., 2023).

What is the role of conspiracy theories in this context then? In Naryn, the Chinese 'bogeyman' conveniently emerges as a unifying target for mobilisation and protest. One anecdote circulating in Kyrgyzstan recounts an unusual encounter in which aliens visited Kyrgyzstan's president and offered to grant him a wish. Filled with anticipation, the president requested a journey to the future: a single day to witness the results of his reforms. The aliens complied, transporting the president to a local market in this future time. As he navigated the food stalls, he noticed remarkably low prices for all the products. Filled with pride, he decided to purchase some bread. However, when he attempted to pay in his national currency, the baker refused to sell him the bread, insisting that all prices were now set in Chinese yuan.

While anecdotal, this story encapsulates a widespread perception of China in the region. Even after the collapse of the USSR, China is often seen through the lens of imperialism and expansionism in Central Asia. Some believe that Beijing's aim is economic subjugation, with the intention of transforming the region into its western province. Others argue that China's real motive is to exploit the natural resources of Central Asia through infrastructure projects. There are also those who assert that China views Central Asian lands as a solution to its overpopulation issue.

Sinophobia in Central Asia largely stems from Sino-Russian tensions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Owen, 2017). Although China and the nomadic societies of Central Asia were historical adversaries, this longstanding animosity resurfaced during the Sino-Soviet split and was further exacerbated by Moscow (Owen, 2017). In the post-Soviet era, a lack of understanding regarding Chinese foreign policy objectives in Central Asia, both among local elites and communities, exacerbated anti-Chinese sentiments. Additionally, the failure of Chinese policies in the region to address this lack of awareness only contributed to the proliferation of speculative theories.

While Sinophobia itself does not constitute a conspiracy theory, it can manifest through the propagation of conspiracy theories. While most of these claims lack a solid foundation, it has become evident that China has emerged as the region's primary bogeyman. According to data from the Central Asia Barometer and Integration Barometer surveys, only a small percentage of re-

spondents in Kyrgyzstan (10%), Kazakhstan (15%) and Tajikistan (20%) consider China to be 'friendly and reliably helpful'. This stands in stark contrast to the positive views held by a much larger percentage of respondents towards Russia, with 87% in Kyrgyzstan, 81% in Kazakhstan and 78% in Tajikistan (Laruelle and Royce, 2020).

Focusing more closely on Naryn, we examine how these global and regional dynamics unfold at the local level. The region's remote location, economic hardship and heavy reliance on pastoralism shape its relationship with foreign investments. Local communities find themselves caught between the lure of economic development and the fear of external subjugation. While Chinese investments promise infrastructure, jobs and modernisation, they are also seen as intrusions, heightening the fear that local people will be left to bear the environmental and social costs while 'foreigners' reap the benefits. Such a disconnect fuels the spread of conspiracy theories, as local grievances are often met with inadequate responses from both central authorities and investors.

In the case of Naryn, conspiracy theories surrounding Chinese expansionism tap into deep-seated anxieties about foreign influence and historical memory. These are not unfounded worries: rather, they reflect longstanding frustrations over the lack of transparency and the unequal distribution of benefits in the extractive industries. Nonetheless, in many instances, these legitimate concerns become entangled with conspiracy theories and ethnonationalist fears, transforming Chinese investors into symbolic targets. Thus, understanding Naryn's local concerns, coupled with broader regional attitudes, provides insight into the delicate balance of power, resources and collective action in this critical part of Central Asia.

Solton-Sary: Challenging foreign investment

Understandably, resource nationalism is a recurring and sensitive theme in Central Asian politics, not limited to Kyrgyzstan alone. For local people, land and its resources are seen as belonging to the community regardless of their legal status and the regulatory agreements signed between investors and governments (Sternberg et al., 2023; Moldalieva and Heathershaw, 2020). Therefore, it is less surprising that resource nationalism, when combined with conspiracy narratives and anti-Chinese sentiments, creates a volatile mixture of tensions and hostilities.

Our research team was present at the Solton-Sary site in July 2019 just two weeks before the fight erupted, affording us a first-hand encounter with Sinophobic sentiments that were already pronounced. In this context, the Naryn region stood out as a locality with limited experience in dealing with Chinese mining companies and the challenges associated with resource extraction, dis-

tinguishing it from the communities we visited in Ala-Buka and Chatkal. In Naryn, Chinese mining companies were primarily engaged in exploration and licensing activities.

Despite this, it was paradoxical for us that the fewer people had engaged with Chinese companies, the more they believed negative speculations. For example, the Ala-Buka and Chatkal regions that we visited had a history of experience with mining companies from China. Despite a variety of concerns and complaints about them, the local communities were more willing to discuss cooperation. In contrast, our respondents from Naryn were more categorical in their position. A resident of the Naryn region (June 2019) summarised it as follows:

> I have negative views [of China]. We should not do anything with this country ... I think the Chinese are here simply to make money. They want to make as much money as possible and then they will leave. They will squeeze every single penny out of us, out of the Kyrgyz government and that's it.

In fact, in the same Naryn region, in 2019, it was announced that the regional centre At-Bashy, located near the Chinese border, would become home to a new $275 million Kyrgyz-Chinese Logistics Centre. The government promised investment for the impoverished region, along with the expectation of creating 10,000 jobs for the community. However, the locals chose to voice their discontent through protests. Anti-China protests and clashes eventually led to the complete abandonment of this project by February 2020 (Putz, 2020). In interviews conducted by our research team in 2019, residents of At-Bashy expressed their concerns about the potential impact of this venture. Some even drew parallels with the famous Kyrgyz national epic, Manas, claiming that historically, their ancestors had fought Chinese invaders to protect the region of At-Bashy.

As one of the herders stated:

> Researcher: What is your opinion about Chinese people?
>
> Herder: Negative. I don't have any positive feelings towards them.
>
> Researcher: Why?
>
> Herder: Because of the land. This land was left to us from our ancestors, how will the next generation live here? The environment is polluted, water is polluted, and the land is destroyed (herder, Naryn region, June 2019).

The contrasting reactions between regions like Naryn and others, such as Ala-Buka, raise important questions about the role of direct engagement. In places where there is more sustained interaction with Chinese companies, a grudging acceptance of the economic realities that accompany foreign invest-

ment is evident. In Naryn, however, where engagement has been limited, fear and resentment take on a more ideological tone, disconnected from practical experience. As a result, the very idea of foreign actors profiting from the Kyrgyz land creates a profound dissonance that fuels both protests and conspiracy narratives. In this context, anti-Chinese sentiments surfaced as a direct response to systemic grievances such as economic inequality, environmental concerns, corruption and lack of accountability, effectively channelling the frustrations of the population.

A similar case was observed in land-related protests in Kazakhstan. This Central Asian nation, which aspires to become one of the world's top thirty economies by 2050, has long prided itself on political stability, particularly in contrast to its neighbour, Kyrgyzstan, which has experienced periods of public unrest (Asian Development Bank, 2017; Alibekov et al., 2005). However, in April 2016, Kazakhstan and its leadership found themselves in an unprecedented situation, grappling with widespread public protests. These protests were incited by rumours that changes to the Land Code of the country would allow Chinese investors to acquire Kazakh lands, fuelling public dissatisfaction and Sinophobic fears. Large crowds of people took to the streets of Kazakhstan to voice their discontent regarding the Land Code amendments. In an effort to placate the restive populace, then-President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, dismissed his ministers of national economy and agriculture and imposed a moratorium on land reform. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan continued to grapple with this issue. The spectre of a Chinese threat periodically resurfaced, as seen in the fall of 2019 when rumours of 55 Chinese factories relocating to Kazakhstan sparked renewed protests (Umarov, 2019).

Both cases illustrate how anti-China narratives can be leveraged to express dissatisfaction with both external actors and domestic governance, highlighting the broader challenge of managing resource nationalism in Central Asia. The fear of exploitation by foreign powers, compounded by historical grievances and a sense of communal preservation, makes any form of foreign investment a highly sensitive issue. Unless economic initiatives are co-created with the communities they impact, even the most promising projects risk becoming entangled in suspicions and animosities.

Accordingly, the link between conspiratorial narratives and mass protests presents an intriguing angle for this paper from the two key perspectives mentioned earlier: the 'deep state' and the 'foreign threat'. In Central Asia, the 'deep state' refers to internal conspiracies involving ruling elites, security services or powerful presidential families, portraying them as covert actors manipulating state affairs behind the scenes. Meanwhile, the 'foreign threat' focuses on external interference, with actors like the USA, Russia and China frequently

implicated. Russia, in particular, plays a significant role in these theories due to its historical influence in the region, reinforcing the belief that it continues to exercise hidden control over Central Asia's political landscape.

As the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan illustrate, conspiracy theories are not necessarily concerned with the binary concepts of truth and falsehood, but rather with efficacy or inefficacy. In certain contexts, such as the changes to Kazakhstan's Land Code, conspiracy theories have proven effective in transitioning from the realm of discourse into real-life scenarios and influencing people's actions. Secondly, conspiracy theories can be interpreted as mirrors reflecting the political, social, and economic environments from which they originate. Central Asia is predominantly marked by corrupt, autocratic, family- or clan-based governance, where ruling regimes grapple with the challenges of solidifying their authority and expanding control over the economy. As David Lewis (2008) has summarised, operating in unstable environments, Central Asian presidents effectively function as neo-feudal rulers wary of democratic ideals and the Western 'war on tyranny'.

Thus, it remains challenging for people to voice their dissent, express grievances against ruling regimes and critique the prevailing governance and political challenges. Nevertheless, Central Asian states do not function as totalitarian regimes. Rather, they navigate in 'the twilight zone between democracy and authoritarianism' (Johnson, 2006: 360). Leaders of these states still have to engage with actual counterparts, manage their electorate and even contend with political opposition in order to govern effectively. Consequently, such environments provide a limited opportunity for the expression of dissatisfaction. Paradoxically, the Chinese 'bogeyman' emerges as that opportunity, serving as both a pretext and a potent catalyst for social mobilisation among discontented individuals and enabling them to vocalise their dissatisfaction with the existing status quo. 'The Chinese question' can be utilised by interest groups to openly rally against mythical Chinese investors, while covertly expressing discontent with the ruling regime.

Therefore, in 2024, we returned to the Naryn region to investigate whether the sentiments of the local communities towards China had changed and how the outbreak of Covid-19 impacted these dynamics. This new context provides an opportunity to explore the evolving perceptions of Chinese investments against a backdrop of heightened economic uncertainty and shifting geopolitical landscapes. Notably, conspiracy theories surrounding Chinese involvement in the region have continued to thrive, influencing local narratives and public sentiment. As the world grapples with the effects of the pandemic, understanding how these factors, including entrenched fears and suspicions, shape local attitudes toward foreign investment and resource management is

crucial. By examining the current landscape in Naryn, we can gain insights into how historical grievances, contemporary challenges and conspiracy narratives intertwine, shaping a more nuanced understanding of the region's aspirations and apprehensions regarding its economic future.

Post-Covid Naryn: Shifting political dynamics and local sentiment

Kyrgyzstan has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a small, landlocked country with an economy heavily reliant on services, migrant remittances and natural resources, Kyrgyzstan has suffered not only from the loss of lives but also from the economic impact. To minimise the spread of the virus, the government quickly implemented strict containment measures such as school closures and restrictions on movement and public gatherings. However, these measures were not enough. The pandemic dealt a severe blow to the country, exposing issues in many areas, from healthcare to education.

Taking this context into account, we revisited the Naryn region to explore whether anti-Chinese sentiments were exacerbated in a Sinophobia-prone region due to the origins of the virus, and whether the swift response from the Chinese government to provide aid, including Sinopharm vaccines and protective equipment, helped mitigate those sentiments. This time, we visited the villages of Emgekchil, Echki-Bashy and Ming-Bulak, which are directly linked to the Solton-Sary mine.

From the very first interviews, it became clear that Covid-19 had a significant impact on the Naryn region. From 12–17 February 2024, we interviewed 36 respondents (six government officials and thirty local residents, some of whom were herders or directly worked at the mine). The majority of people acknowledged that there was a significant number of deaths, particularly among those with long-term illnesses. That said, there were no lockdown measures or strict rules within the villages themselves. Many visited each other and continued to live their lives as normal. Residents would even drive through fields to visit neighbouring villages, although travelling to the city was particularly challenging. Road closures meant that only two taxis from each village were permitted to travel to the city to purchase supplies for the entire village. Locals would provide a list of needed products for these taxi drivers.

Nonetheless, to prevent the spread of the virus, the villagers were compelled to get vaccinated, particularly those working as public officials, schoolteachers and kindergarten staff. As one of the residents (Naryn region, February 2024) recalled:

> Because I work in the kindergarten, we were the first to be vaccinated. If we refused the vaccine, we were told that we would lose our jobs. Some were

> told to write their resignation letters. They literally forced us to get the vaccine. Many of us did not want to lose our employment, so we agreed. We gave our health to them. When we were getting vaccinated, we heard that through the vaccine we would get a chip.

'Getting a chip' was not the only thing that could happen to the vaccinated, according to rumours. Some respondents mentioned that after the vaccine, they would only live for two years. Despite this, they still received the vaccines. As a respondent from Echki-Bashy village (February 2024) stated, 'Because I work in the school as technical staff, I received the vaccine four times. After one more vaccine, we will turn into zombies.'

Respondents' dissatisfaction with the Chinese vaccines was less related to conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus and more about a general distrust of Chinese-made food and medication. The villagers said that they prohibit their children from buying cheap Chinese candy and noodles, as they are deemed harmful to health. They believe that consuming Chinese candy, for instance, could lead to health problems and even impact their children's ability to have children of their own. Many villagers mentioned instances of Chinese people producing plastic rice, plastic eggs and other similar products. They lamented that Chinese products are usually very cheap, which means they still end up buying Chinese-made goods to save money.

Such distrust was evident not only regarding food and consumer goods. The respondents continued to harbour distrust of China and Chinese entrepreneurs. As a resident of Echki-Bashy (February 2024) summed up, 'I want Chinese tourists to come, but I don't want to see Chinese investors.' In many instances, the respondents had never even met or spoken to Chinese people, but when justifying their anti-China sentiments, they would refer to history and myths: 'Our ancestors did not like the Chinese [laughing]. Our father Manas chased them away from these lands, so nothing has changed since then. I don't think you will find people in the village who think that Chinese are good people' (resident, Emgekchil village, 2024).

In this context, it is unsurprising that numerous conspiracy theories about China's role in the pandemic circulated locally through word of mouth and social media. For example, respondents mentioned a theory that the Chinese purposely created the virus to control the population: the virus was allegedly engineered in a laboratory to manage population growth rates in China and worldwide. Another theory involved stories about Chinese vaccines containing chips: according to these narratives, Chinese vaccines were purportedly designed to implant chips into humans for future control purposes. In essence, even though these stories did not help improve China's image, they appeared

to be unreasonable and untrustworthy even to the locals. What is important, however, is the capacity of these stories to impact discourse.

Recently, there have been reports that the Solton-Sary mine has been taken over by an Indian company and that the company is actively preparing for gold mining (Akchabar, 2024; Kapar kyzy, 2024). We understood that mining was planned to begin in the second half of 2024. Given the history of violent resistance to the exploration of Solton-Sary by locals, we were keen to determine if the risk of a repeat of the August 2019 events remained present.

At first glance, it appeared that not much had changed. Understandably, local people feel that the land and its resources belong to their community. 'I think we should not give it to the Chinese. We should mine it ourselves. We used to mine previously. Each mine and its resources should be mined by the Kyrgyz. The resources should be used by the government for revenue. No need for foreigners', said one of the residents of Echki-Bashy village (February 2024).

Despite the reports of an Indian company entering the mining scene, locals interviewed during field research consistently claimed that the mine is still owned by the Chinese and that Chinese workers are employed there. Due to the impact of Covid-19, the situation at the mine has been relatively quiet, but locals still express dissatisfaction with the alleged Chinese return and concerns that the environment is being harmed. As a resident of Emgekchil village (February 2024) lamented,

> Last time I was there (on pasture), it was bad. We chased the Chinese away last time, but they returned and started mining again. Yes, I go to Solton-Sary every year, I take the livestock from villagers and personally go there. Yes, and this year they allowed the Chinese to use cyanide, so I don't know what will happen. They don't let locals near the mine now, they are calling it a moratorium for locals. Soon it will be solved, maybe they will not let any locals near the mine. We don't know.

Similar to the build-up to the events of August 2019, it is difficult to verify at this stage whether there are really Chinese workers on the site or if they are using dangerous chemicals like cyanide. What is striking is that, despite the presence of a very similar discourse, our researchers did not identify the same boiling sentiments as in 2019. On the contrary, many respondents supported the mine's operations this time. They believed that the new leadership of the country, with President Sadyr Japarov at its helm, is driven by noble intentions.

All in all, the local community's acceptance of the fact that Solton-Sary will be mined is surprising. However, this indicates that the relationship between conspiracy theories, public discontent and the political landscape in Central Asia is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon. While conspiracy theories frequently arise as a response to systemic grievances, they possess the potential to galvanise

and direct the frustrations of the population, even when conventional channels for dissent are limited. The prevalence of Sinophobic sentiments in the region illustrates how these narratives can be harnessed to express dissatisfaction with both external actors and domestic governance.

The case of Solton-Sary is a vivid example of such a dynamic. The initial conditions have not significantly changed: there is a gold mine, there are foreign investors and there is a high degree of Sinophobia. However, four years ago, the villagers resorted to violence to manifest their anger against the Chinese. Now, they still view them through the lenses of imperialism and expansionism, but they are more willing to accommodate and work with them.

For instance, the younger generation respondents recognised the need to engage with China to facilitate development. Some admitted that they even resort to purchasing Chinese products online (mainly clothing and home products) at significantly lower costs, which are then conveniently delivered directly to their village. The older generation respondents' narratives also appear to be less aggressive, though tinged with hopelessness. As a resident of Ming-Bulak village (February 2024) lamented, 'China will take over, it is inevitable. It is taking over the world, so how can you get rid of the Chinese? We are wearing Chinese clothes, eating Chinese food. We have no other option. The Chinese are feeding us. So, tell me, how will we get rid of them?'

These new developments in the Naryn region circumstantially confirm my argument that conspiracy theories can be interpreted as mirrors reflecting the political, social and economic environments from which they originate. The horror story of the Chinese 'bogeyman' serves as a pretext and a potent catalyst, enabling discontented individuals to vocalise their dissatisfaction with the existing status quo. Conspiracy theories illuminate the prevailing fears and anxieties of a specific community, shedding light on the existing power dynamics and collective narratives within that society.

International experiences reveal that mining can significantly impact the livelihoods of pastoralists in several ways: from bringing new opportunities such as jobs, infrastructure and access to new markets to negative impacts such as land loss, water pollution and disruption of traditional practices. At this moment, the local community in the Naryn region appears to be quite content with the existing political dynamics and trusts the new leadership, even if it impacts their livelihoods. They have little desire to violently resist gold mine exploration, whether it be by an Indian company or the Chinese. However, the political context today is different from that of 2019. The rise to power of the current president of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov, was unexpected. Protests against fraudulent parliamentary elections in October 2020 quickly escalated into public unrest and the fall of the Kyrgyz Government. Japarov, who was serving an 11.5-

year sentence for kidnapping a local official at the time, was freed from prison by protesters and rapidly rose to the highest political position. The Supreme Court acquitted him in a subsequent trial, and he became the interim prime minister. Soon after, his supporters forced then-president Sooronbay Jeenbekov to resign, allowing Japarov to assume the role of the country's acting president.

Although his rise to power was unexpected, Japarov's ascent can be attributed to his popularity among the general public. He is viewed as a man of the people and the voice of the poor. He rose to political stardom with the idea of nationalising the largest Canadian-owned gold mine, Kumtor, which he eventually achieved after being sworn in as president. Japarov accumulated his political capital by capitalising on the idea that natural resources belong to the people and should work for their benefit. Accordingly, this might explain why communities in mining-affected localities, such as in the Naryn region, support mine explorations, even though they are in principle against such processes. As one of the residents of Emgekchil village (February 2024) boasted:

> Taking Kumtor back was a good step; it will be very beneficial for us. They have announced that 45–50 tons of gold will be mined. But it is much larger than that; they are just not saying it. The mine will work for two more years, so a lot of gold will be mined. If Sadyr [the current president Japarov] continues to work, I don't think it will be a problem … Other nations benefited from the mine, but that is done; it is in the past.

Not only are the respondents confident that mines will be developed for the benefit of the people, but they also believe that the new leadership can navigate through the difficulties of repaying the loans taken from China. As confirmed by one of the residents of Emgekchil village (February 2024), 'I used to worry before, but now I know Sadyr [the current president Japarov] will pay [the debt to China].'

As of now, local communities in Kyrgyzstan, including in regions like Naryn, appear relatively content with the current political dynamics and have placed their trust in the leadership of Sadyr Japarov. His rise to power has created a sense of hope and stability for many, even as his policies impact livelihoods. Japarov's strong nationalist rhetoric and focus on reclaiming Kyrgyz resources for the benefit of the population have resonated with communities that previously felt marginalised or exploited by foreign investors. This shift in public sentiment, however, has also led to a more complex relationship with foreign investment, where communities may be more willing to accept short-term sacrifices in exchange for the promise of long-term national gains under his leadership.

Yet, the question remains whether this trust will hold if economic conditions do not improve or if his administration's promises fall short, especially in regions like Naryn that have historically been wary of external influence.

Conspiracy theories are mirrors that reflect the political, social, and economic environments from which they emerge. In the case of Naryn and Solton-Sary, the narratives surrounding Chinese investment and resource extraction are not just products of anti-foreign sentiment but are deeply intertwined with local frustrations, historical grievances and fears of exploitation. These theories provide a framework for communities to interpret complex issues like foreign influence, environmental degradation and economic inequality, often in the absence of transparent communication or trusted institutions. In this context, conspiracy theories serve as a lens through which local populations express their anxieties about both external actors, such as Chinese companies, and internal governance failures. The case of Naryn, where protests and clashes erupted despite the limited direct engagement with Chinese companies, illustrates how these narratives can gain traction even in regions with minimal first-hand experience, highlighting the broader distrust and underlying socio-political tensions that shape public perception. Thus, since conspiracy theories are about their efficacy or inefficacy, their transition from the realm of discourse into real-life scenarios and influencing the actions of various actors can also become a matter of time.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the intricate interplay of conspiracy theories, political dynamics and local sentiment in the context of Chinese investment and resource extraction in Kyrgyzstan, specifically focusing on the Naryn region and the Solton-Sary case. It examined how anti-China narratives, fuelled by historical grievances, resource nationalism and fears of foreign exploitation, have shaped public perceptions and sparked tensions. Conspiracy theories, particularly those surrounding foreign threats, serve as lenses through which local communities express their anxieties about economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and governance failures. The eruption of protests in Naryn, despite limited engagement with Chinese companies, illustrates how these narratives can amplify distrust and create resistance, even in areas with minimal first-hand experience of foreign involvement.

The chapter also contextualises these developments within the shifting political landscape of Kyrgyzstan, particularly under the leadership of Sadyr Japarov. His rise to power, driven by public discontent with previous administrations, has garnered widespread trust, even as his nationalist rhetoric may impact local livelihoods. In the post-Covid environment, where economic uncertainties have heightened, this trust represents both a stabilising force and a potential source of future tension, should the government fail to deliver on its promises of resource control and development. By examining these dynamics, the paper

sheds light on how conspiracy theories and political transitions reflect broader societal anxieties, shaping the region's evolving relationship with foreign actors and its own political leadership.

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